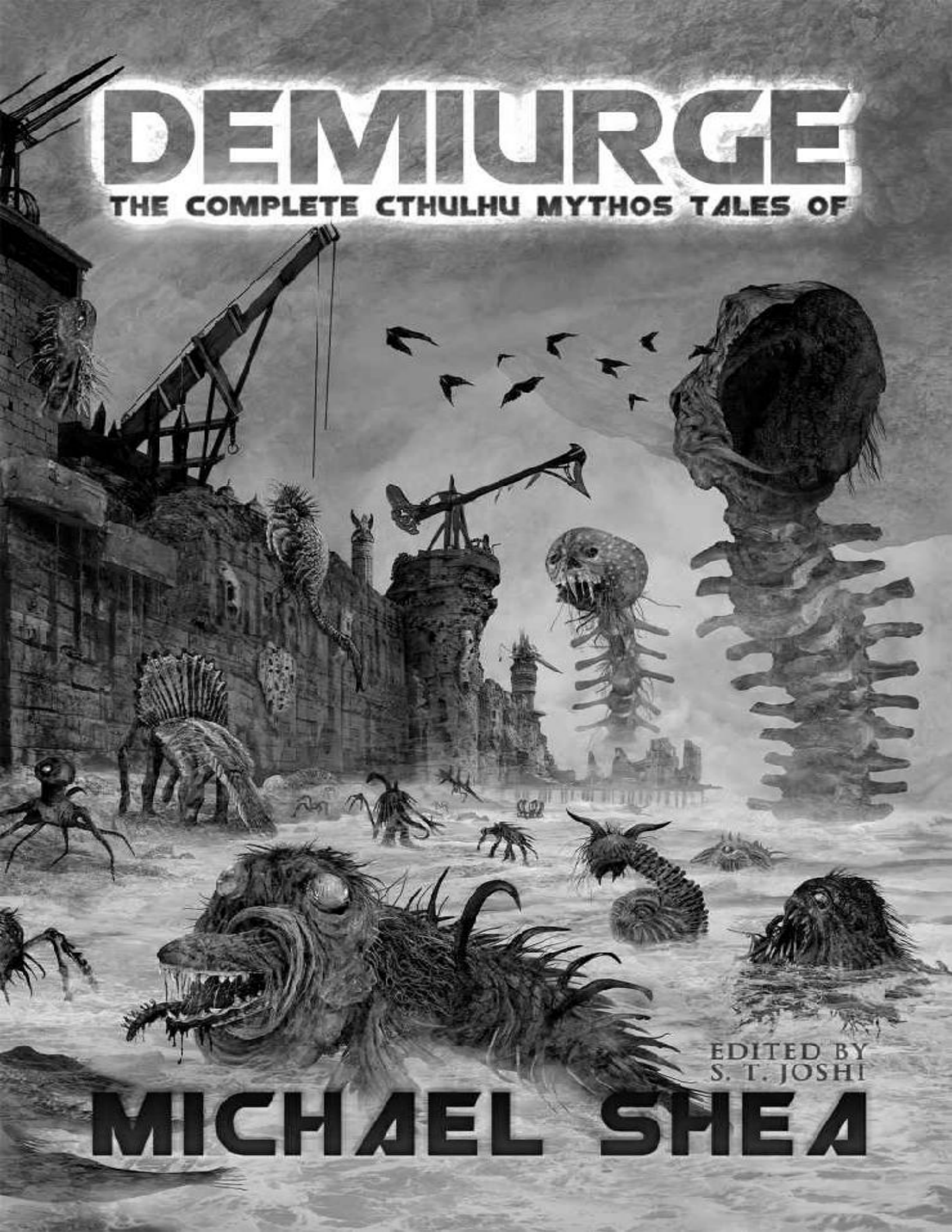
DEMIURGE
THE COMPLETE CTHULHU MYTHOS TALES OF
EDITED BY
S. T. JOSHI
MICHAEL SHEA

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DARK REGIONS
PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

S. T. JOSHI

It is not at all surprising that the late Michael Shea was attracted to the work of H. P. Lovecraft, for both authors shared a fascination with myth, real or ersatz. Shea's own writings draw upon myth and legend from as early as the Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 1700 BCE), and his own vibrant Nifft the Lean novels evolve myths of their own while acknowledging debts to classical and Near Eastern myth (not to mention some tips of the hat to the historical sword-and-sorcery tales of Fritz Leiber). Lovecraft drew upon similar sources, as well as the mythmaking of the great Irish fantaisiste Lord Dunsany, to develop the Cthulhu Mythos as the quintessential expression of his notions of cosmic dread and human insignificance. But Michael Shea was anything but a pastichist; even when he was writing in novels or tales that avowedly imitated the work of others, his own dynamic originality kept bursting through—and the result is a series of works that, while drawing inspiration from prior texts, are infused with the distinctive vision of their creator.

One of Shea's earliest tales, "*Nemo Me Impune Lacessit*" (1982; the title translates loosely to "No one hurts me and gets away with it") is a piquant fusion of motifs from both Poe and Lovecraft, quite different from the other stories in this book. Shea went on to write the novel *The Color out of Time* (1984), a quasi-sequel to Lovecraft's classic tale of regional horror, "The Colour out of Space." In writing this novel, Shea was compelled to set it in Lovecraft's New England; but he quickly decided that he needed to draw upon his own Californian roots to generate tales that truly evoked the realistic topography—human, social, cultural, historical—of Lovecraft's best narratives.

The result was “Fat Face” (1988), a tale that truly expands upon Lovecraftian themes by being set in the contemporary world of San Francisco. But this is not the sanitized San Francisco of bohemian artists, but the gritty underbelly of that great metropolis, with its whores, drug dealers, and others who feed the vices and predilections of a heterogeneous populace. Shea, eschewing simple-minded moral condemnation, finds in these exiles from polite society a brooding determination to persevere in the face of poverty, crime and social condemnation that is strangely ennobling. Shea may or may not have recognized that characterization was one of the weakest elements in Lovecraft’s literary arsenal, and by design (“Individuals are all momentary trifles bound from a common nothingness toward another common nothingness,” he once wrote in justifying his cosmic perspective), but Shea sensed that the cosmic and the human were not mutually exclusive. In such scintillating tales as “Copping Squid,” “Dagoniad,” and “Tsathoggua” he slyly leads the reader to the perception of unthinkable cosmic terror by means of characters whose all-too-human flaws make them the reader’s eyes and ears as the awesome revelation slowly dawns.

Topographical horror is also at the root of Shea’s two tales set in Antarctica, “Beneath the Beardmore” and “Under the Shelf,” which draw upon Lovecraft’s great novel of Antarctic terror, *At the Mountains of Madness*. Here too, the cosmic and the human are simultaneously on display in sensitive portrayals of scientists braving both an unforgiving climate and the gradual realization of cosmic abnormality.

The title story of this collection deserves more than a few words. “Demiurge” (the word is pure Greek, meaning “world-creator”) may not on the surface seem Lovecraftian, but its account of a strange creature who may be coeval with the creation of our planet bears significant parallels to “The Dunwich Horror” and to Lovecraft’s tales of psychic possession, ranging from “The Thing on the Doorstep” to “The Shadow out of Time.” The entity, ignorant of the ways of the world but learning fast by absorbing the minds and bodies of other creatures, is a kind of naïve window upon our own overbuilt and overcivilized society—and perhaps he will be the harbinger of our downfall, as the Earth is wiped clean and life can start anew. Rarely has a tale so intimately melded horror and pathos, fascination and terror.

The tales in this volume are by no means Shea's last word in Lovecraftian fiction. He wrote the full-length novel *Mr. Cannyharme*, based—incredibly enough—on one of Lovecraft's poorest stories, "The Hound." But this novel, set again in the underside of San Francisco, pares away the absurdities of Lovecraft's overwritten tale and presents a compelling array of characters, not the least of whom is the baleful figure of the title. We hope this novel will soon be published, so that readers can fully appreciate the degree to which Michael Shea both drew inspiration from H. P. Lovecraft and also transmuted Lovecraft's conceptions into his own by the alchemy of his imagination.

Michael Shea will be remembered for many things—his Nifft the Lean novels, such chilling tales as "Autopsy" and "The Growlimb," and most of all for being one of the most distinctive and beloved human beings of his time. He may not have shared many personal characteristics with the lantern-jawed dreamer from Providence, Rhode Island; but this book testifies that he evolved into a genuine disciple whose vibrant originality and sensitivity Lovecraft would have recognized and admired.

FAT FACE

> “They were infamous, nightmare sculptures even when telling of age-old, bygone things; for sho goths and their work ought not to be seen by h man beings or portrayed by any beings …”
> – Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*

When Patti came back to working the lobby of the Parnassus Hotel, it was clear she was liked from the way the other girls teased her and unobtrusively took it easy on her for the first few weeks while she got to feel steadier. She was deeply relieved to be back.

Before she had to go up to State Hospital, she had been doing four nights a week at a massage-parlor called The Encounter, of which her pimp was part owner. He insisted the parlor beat was like a vacation to her, because it was strictly a hand-job operation and the physical demands on her were lighter than regular hotel whoring. Patti would certainly have agreed that the work was lighter—if it hadn’t been for the robberies and killings. The last of these had been the cause of her breakdown, and though she never admitted this to Pete, her pimp, he had no doubt sensed the truth, for he had let her go back to the Parnassus and told her she could pay him half rate for the next few weeks, till she was feeling steady again.

In her first weeks at the massage-parlor, she had known with all but certainty of two clients—not hers—who had taken one-way drives from The Encounter up into the Hollywood Hills. These incidents still wore a thin, merciful veil of doubt. It was the third one that passed too closely for her to face away from it.

From the moment of his coming in, unwillingly she felt spring up in her the conviction that the customer was a perfect victim; physically soft, small, fatly walleted, more than half drunk, out-of-state. She learned his name when her man studied his wallet thoroughly on the pretext of checking his credit cards, and the man’s permitting of this liberty revealed how fuddled he was. She walked ahead swinging her bottom, and as he stumbled after, down the hall to a massage room, she could almost feel in her own head the ugly calculations clicking in Pete’s.

The massage room was tiny. It had a not-infrequently-puked-on carpet and a table. As she stood there, pounding firmly on him through the towel, trying to concentrate on her rhythm, she beheld an obese black cockroach running boldly across the carpet. Afterward she was willing to believe she had hallucinated, so strange was the thing she remembered. The bug, half as big as her hand, had stopped at midfloor and *stared* at her, and she in that instant had seen clearly and looked deep into the inhuman little black-bead eyes, and had known that the man she was just then firing off into the towel was going to die later that night. There would be a grim, half-slurred conversation in some gully under the stars, there would be perhaps a long signing of traveler's checks payable to the fictitious name on a certain set of false I.D. cards, and then the top of the plump man's head would be blown off.

Patti was a lazy girl who lazily wanted things to be nice, but was very good at adjusting to things that were not nice at all, if somebody strong really insisted on them. Part of it was that Patti was indecisive by nature. Left alone, she was made miserable by the lonely struggle of deciding what to do. Pete was expensive, but at least he kept Patti's time fully planned out for her. With him to supervise, Patti's life fit her snugly, with no room for confusing doubts.

But this plump man's head, all pale in moonlight, blown wide open—the image wouldn't leave her; it festered in her imagination. The body was found in three days and got two paragraphs, but the few lines included corroboration of her fantasy, in the words "gunshot wounds to the head."

By the time she read these paragraphs, Patti was already half sick with alcohol and insomnia, and that night she took some pills that she was lucky enough to have pumped out of her an hour or so later.

But now, with the hospital's Xanax just fading from her system and a little of her appetite and her energy coming back, Patti decided that if there was any best therapy for her kind of nightmare, it was this, hooking again out of the lobby of the Parnassus. Some of the bittersweet years of her apprenticeship had been served here. The fat, shabby red furniture still had a voluptuous feel to her. The big, dowdy Parnassus, uptown in the forties, now stood in the porno heartland of Hollywood. It was a district of neon and snarled traffic on narrow overparked streets engineered before the Great Depression. And Patti loved to watch it all, the glitter and glossy vehicles, through the plate-glass window of the lobby, taking it easy, only getting up

and ambling out to the sidewalk now and then when there was eye-contact from a shopping john driving past. This was the way hooking should be.

Before this whole massage-parlor thing, she was working harder, maybe half her time in the lobby and half walking. But now she felt still queasy, thin-skinned after all those drugs and the hospital. She thought of walking, and it made her remember her painful amateur years, the beatings, the cheats who humped and dumped her, the quick, sticky douches taken with a shook-up bottle of Coke while squatting between trash bins in an alley. Yes, here in the lobby was the best kind of hooking. The old desk-guys took a little gate on one or two rooms, but very few tricks actually went down here. This lobby was a natural showcase. The nearby Bridgeport or Aztec Arms was where 90 percent of the bedwork went on.

This suited Patti. She was small-town born, central California, and had a certain sunny sentimentalism, an impulse for community and camaraderie, that had led her to be called “Hometown” by some of the other girls, most of them liking her for it while they laughed at her. She laughed along, but stubbornly she cherished a sense of neighborhood on these noisy carnival streets. She cultivated acquaintances. She infallibly greeted the man at the drugstore with cordial remarks on the traffic or the smog. The man, bald and thin-moustached, never did more than grin at her with timid greed and scorn. The douches, deodorizers, and fragrances she bought so steadily had prejudiced him, and guaranteed his misreading of her folksy genialities.

Or she would josh the various pimply employees at the Dunk-O-Rama in a similar spirit, saying things like, “They sure got you working, don’t they?” or, of the tax, “The old Governor’s got to have his bite, don’t he?” When asked how she wanted her coffee, she always answered with neighborly amplitude: “Well, let’s see—I guess I’m in the mood for cream today.” These things, coming from a vamp-eyed brunette in her twenties, wearing a halter top, short-shorts, and Grecian sandals, disposed the adolescent counter-hops more to sullen leers than to answering warmth. Yet she persisted in her fantasies. She even greeted Arnold, the smudged, moronic vendor at the corner newsstand, by name—this in spite of an all-too-lively and gurgling responsiveness on his part.

Now, in her recuperation, Patti took an added comfort from this vein of sentiment. This gave her sisterhood much to rally her about in their generally affectionate recognition that she was much shaken and needed some feedback and some steadying.

A particular source of hilarity for them was Patti's revival of interest in Fat Face, whom she always insisted was their friendliest "neighbor" in their "local community."

An old ten-story office building stood on the corner across the street from the Parnassus. As is not uncommon in L.A., the simple box-shaped structure bore ornate cement frieze work on its façade, and all along the pseudo-architraves capping the pseudo-pillars of the building's sides. Such friezes always have exotic clichés as their theme—they are an echo of DeMille's Hollywood. The one across from the Parnassus had a Mesopotamian theme—ziggurat-shaped finials crowning the pseudo-pillars, and murals of wrenched profiles, curly-bearded figures with bulging calves.

A different observer than Patti would have judged the building schlock, but effective for all that, striking the viewer with a subtle sense of alien portent. Patti seldom looked higher than its fourth floor, where the usually open window of Fat Face's office was.

Fat Face's busincsses—he ran two—appeared to be the only active concerns in the whole capacious structure. The gaudy unlikelihood of both of these "businesses" was the cause of endless hilarity among the Parnassus girls. The two enterprises lettered on the building's dusty directory were: HYDROTHERAPY CLINIC and PET REFUGE.

What made the comedy irresistible was that sometimes the clients of the two services arrived together. The hydrotherapy patients were a waddling, pachydermous lot, gimping on bulky orthopedic boots, their wobbly bulks rippling in roomy jumpsuits or bib overalls. And, as if these hulks required an added touch, they sometimes came with cats and dogs in tow. These beasts' wails and struggles against their leashes or carrying cages made it plain that they were strays, not pets. The misshapen captors' fleshy, stolid faces, as if oblivious to the thrashings of the beasts, added that last note of slapstick to the spectacle.

Fat Face himself—they had no other name for him—was often at his high window, a dear, ruddy bald countenance beaming avuncularly down on the hookers in the lobby across the street. His bubble baldness was the object of much lewd humor among the girls and the pimps. Fat Face was much waved-at in sarcasm, whereat he always smiled a crinkly smile that seemed to understand and not to mind. Patti, when she sometimes waved, did so with pretty sincerity.

Because though you had to laugh at Fat Face, the man had some substance to him. He had several collection vans with the Pet Refuge logo —apparently his hydrotherapy patients also volunteered as drivers for these vans. The leaflet they passed out was really touching:

Help us Help!
Let our aid reach these
unfortunate creatures.
Nourished, spayed, medicated,
They may have a better chance
for health and life!

This generosity of feeling in Fat Face did not prevent his being talked about in the lobby of the Parnassus, where great goiter-rubbing, water-splashing orgies were raucously hypothesized, with Fat Face flourishing whips and baby oil, while cries of “rub my blubber!” filled the air. At such times Patti was impelled to leave the lobby, because it felt like betrayal to be laughing so hard at the goodly man.

Indeed, in her convalescent mellowness, much augmented by Valium, she had started to fantasize going up to his office, pulling the blinds, and ravishing him at his desk. She imagined him lonely and horny. Perhaps he had nursed his wife through a long illness and she at last expired gently … He would be so grateful!

But forward though Patti could be, she found in herself an odd shyness about this. It would be easy enough to cross the street, go up to his clinic, knock on his door … But she didn’t. A week, seven nice long convalescent days, rolled by, and she did nothing about this sentimental little urge of hers.

Then late one afternoon, Sheri, her best friend among the girls, took her to a bar a few blocks down the street. Patti drank, got happy and goofy. The two girls sat trading yo-mammas and boasts and dares, and then it just popped naturally out of Patti’s mouth: “So why don’t you go up and give old Fat Face a lube?”

“Jesus, girl, if all of him’s fat as his face, it’d be like lube-ing a hill!”

But there was the exploit on the table between them, and they both felt too jolly and rowdy to back down. “So whatta you saying, you trick only

superstars? So what if he's fat? Think how nice it'd be for him!"

"I bet he'd blush till his whole head looked like an eggplant. Then, if there was just a slit in the top, like Melanie was saying—" Sheri had to break off and hold herself as she laughed. She had already done some drinking earlier in the afternoon. Patti called for another double and exerted herself to catch up, and meanwhile she harped on her theme to Sheri and tried to get her serious attention:

"I mean I've been working out of the Parnassus—what? Maybe three years now? No, four! Four years. I'm part of these people's community—the druggist, Arnold, Fat Face—and yet we never do anything to show it. There's no getting together. We're just faces. I mean like Fat Face—I couldn't even *call* him that!"

"So let's *both* go up—there's enough there for two!"

Patti was about to answer when, behind the bar, she saw a big roach scamper across a rubber mat and disappear under the baseboard. She remembered the plump body in the towel, and remembered—as a thing actually seen—the slug-fragmented skull.

Sheri sensed a chill. She ordered two more doubles and began making bawdy suppositions about the outcome of their visit. The pair of them marched out laughing a quarter hour later, out into the late afternoon streets. The gold-drenched sidewalks swarmed, the pavements were jammed with rumbling motors. Jaunty and loud, the girls sauntered back to their intersection and crossed over to the old building. Its heavy oak-and-glass doors were pneumatically stiff and cost them a stagger to force open. But when they swung shut, it was swiftly, with a deep click, and they sealed out the street sound with amazing, abrupt completeness. The glass was dirty and put a sulphurous glaze on the already surreal copper of the declining sun's light outside. Suddenly it might be Mars or Jupiter beyond those doors, and the girls themselves stood within a great dim stillness that might have matched the feeling of a real Mesopotamian ruin, out on some starlit desert. The images were alien to Patti's thought—startling intrusions in a mental voice not precisely her own. Sheri gave a comic shiver but otherwise made no acknowledgment of similar feelings.

They found the elevator had an out-of-order sign fixed to the switch plate by yellowed Scotch tape. The stairway's ancient carpet was blackish-green, with a venerable rubber corridor mat up its center. Out on the street the booze in Patti's system had felt just right; in this silent, dusty stairwell it

made her slightly woozy. The corridor mat, so cracked with age, put her in mind of supple reptilian skin. Sheri climbed ahead of her, still joking, cackling, but her voice seemed small, seemed to struggle like a drowner in the heavy silence. It amazed Patti, how utterly her sense of gaiety had fled her. It had been clicked off, abrupt as a light switch, when those heavy street doors had closed behind them.

At the first two landings they peeked down the halls at similar vistas: green-carpeted corridors of frosted-glass doors with rich brass knobs. Bulbs burned miserly few, and in those corridors Patti sensed, with piercing vividness, the feeling of *kept* silence. It was not a void silence, but a full one, made by presences not stirring.

And as they climbed her sense of strangeness condensed in her, became something that gripped her by the spine. She was afraid! My God, what *of*? It was ridiculous, but when Sheri led them into the fourth-floor corridor, performing a comic bow, Patti's legs felt cold and leaden, and carried her unwillingly.

"Come *on*!" Sheri mocked. There was something too much, something feverish about the hilarity in her eyes.

Patti balked. "It's a bad idea. You win, I'm chicken—let's get outta here."

"Ha! And you call yourself a working girl! Well, just a minute here." She took out the little pad she carried for phone numbers and addresses, and hurried down the hall with a parody butt-swinging hooker's prowl. The doors nearest Patti said HYDROTHERAPY CLINIC with an arrow—she watched Sheri pass other doors, sashaying all the way to the corridor's far end. Patti stood waiting. Did she hear, ever so faintly, a kind of echo from behind these closed doors? Sooo faint, but the echoes of something resonating in a vast cavernous space? And there … ever so soft … it was almost like the piping of a flute …

Sheri stood by the last door, scribbling on the pad. She ripped off the sheet and slipped it under the door. Then she came running back like a kid who's played a prank. Patti willingly caught her mood—they rushed giggling back down the stairs like larking twelve-year-olds. Patti wondered if Sheri too was giggling from sheer relief to be out of this building.

"What'd you write him, fool?!" Patti was elated to be back on the street, out in its noise and its colors; she felt like someone who has just escaped drowning. "You trying to steal my date?" Sheri had once tampered with a

note that Patti had passed at a party, so that the trick would show up at Sheri's house instead of Patti's.

Sheri mimed outrage. "What you take me for? Come on for a beer, on me!"

As they walked, every outdoor breath reassured Patti. "Hey, Sher—did you hear any, like, music up there?" Even out here in the traffic noise she could call up clearly the weird piping tune, not so much a tune, really, as an eerie melodic ramble. What bothered her as much as the strange feeling of the music was the way in which she had received it. It seemed to her that she had not heard it, but rather *remembered* it—suddenly and vividly—though she hadn't the trace of an idea now where she might have heard it before. Sheri's answer confirmed her thought:

"Music? Baby, there wasn't a sound up there! Wasn't it kind of spooky?" Sheri's mood stayed giddy and Patti gladly fell in with it. They went to another bar they liked and drank for an hour or so—slowly, keeping a gloss on things, feeling humorous and excited like schoolgirls on a trip together. At length they decided to go to the Parnassus, find somebody with a car, and scare up a cruising party.

As they crossed to the hotel, Sheri surprised Patti by throwing a look at the old office building and giving a shrug that may have been half shudder. "Jesus. It was like being under the ocean or something in there, wasn't it, Patti?"

This echo of her own dread made Patti look again at her friend. Then Arnold, the vendor, stepped out from the newsstand and blocked their way.

The uncharacteristic aggressiveness gave Patti a nasty twinge. Arnold was unlovely. There was a babyish fatness and redness about every part of him. His scanty red hair alternately suggested infancy or feeble age, and his one eyeless socket, with its weepy red folds of baggy lid, made his whole face look as if screwed to cry. Over all his red, ambling softness there was a bright blackish glaze of inveterate filth. And moronic though his manner was most of the time, Patti felt a cunning about him, something sly and corrupt. The cretinous wet-mouthed face he now thrust close to the girls seemed, somehow, to be that of a grease-painted con man, not an imbecile. As if it were a sour fog that surrounded the newsman, fear entered Patti's nostrils and dampened the skin of her arms. Arnold raised his hand. Pinched between his smudgy thumb and knuckle were an envelope and a fifty-dollar bill.

“A man said to read this, Patti!” Arnold’s childish intonation now struck Patti as an affectation, like his dirtiness, part of a chosen disguise.

“He said the money was to pay you to read it. It’s a trick! He gave me twenty dollars!” Arnold giggled. The sense of cold-blooded deception in the man made Patti’s voice shake when she questioned him about the man who’d given him the commission. He remembered nothing, an arm and a voice in a dark car that pulled up and sped off.

“Well, how is she supposed to read it?” Sheri prodded. “Should she be by a window? Should she wear anything special?”

But Arnold had no more to tell them, and Patti willingly gave up on him to escape the revulsion he so unexpectedly roused in her. They went into the lobby with the letter, but such was its strangeness—so engrossingly lurid were the fleeting images that came clear for them—that they ended taking it back to the bar, getting a booth, and working over it with the aid of beers and lively surroundings. The document was in the form of an unsigned letter that covered two pages in a lucid, cursive script of bizarre elegance, and that ran thus:

> Dear Girls:
>
> How does a Shoggoth Lord go wooing? You do not even guess enough to ask! Then let it be asked and answered for you. As it is written: “The Shoggoth Lord stumbleth unto his belusted, lo, he cometh heavily unto her, upon alien feet. From the sunless sea, from under the mountains of ice, cometh the mighty Shoggoth Lord unto her.” Dear, dear girls! Where is this place the shoggothoi come from? In your tender, sensual ignorance you might well lack the power to be astonished by the prodigious gulfs of Space and Time this question probes. But let it once more be asked and answered for you. Thus has the answer been written:
>
> *Shun the gulf beneath the peaks,*
> *The caverned ocean black as night,*
> *Where star-spawned gods made their retreat*
> *From the slowly freezing world of light.*
> *For even star-spawn may grow weak,*
> *While what has been its slave gains strength;*

Even star-spawn's will may break,
While slaves feed on their lords at length.

Sweet harlots! Darling, heedless trollops! You cannot imagine the Shoggoth Lord's mastery of shapes! His race has bred smaller since modern man last met with it. Oh, but the Shoggoth Lords are limber now! Supremest polymorphs—though what they are beneath all else is Horror itself. But how is it they press their loving suit? What do they murmur to her they hotly crave? You must know that the shoggoth craves her fat with panic—full of the psychic juices of despair.

Therefore he taunts her with their ineluctable union; therefore he pipes and flutes to her his bold, seductive lyric, while he vows with a burning glare in his myriad eyes that she'll be his. Thus he sings:

Your veil shall be the wash of blood
That dims and drowns your dying eyes.
You'll have for bridesmaids Pain and Dread,
For vows, you'll jabber blasphemies.

My scalding flesh will be your gown,
And Agony your bridal song.
You shall both be my bread
And, senses reeling, watch me fed.

O maids, prepare her swiftly!
Speedily her loins unlace!
Her tender paps anoint,
And bare unto my seething face!

Thus, dear girls, he ballads and rondelets his belusted, thus he waltzes her spirit through dark, empty halls of expectation, of

> always-hearkening Horror, until the dance has reached that last, closed room of consummation!

As many times as the girls flung these pages onto the table, they picked them up again after short hesitation. Both Sheri and Patti were very marginal readers, but the flashes of coherent imagery in the letter kept them coming back to the cryptic parts, trying to pick the lock of their meaning. They held menace even in their very calligraphy, whose baroque, barbed elegance seemed sardonic and alien. The mere sonority of some of the obscure passages evoked vivid images, a sense of murky submersion in benthic pressures of fearful expectation, while unseen giants abided nearby in the dark.

The document's cumulative effect on Patti was more of melancholy than fear. The john who wrote it was a hurt-freak, sure, but the letter-writing types blew it off that way and never came to dealing harm. The girls had done some blow from Sheri's vial to clear their heads from the beers, and Patti's body was liking it; she was feeling stronger than she had for days. This letter writer's words were strange, yes, this incredible gloominess hung over them—but then, bottom line, this was a very easy fifty bucks.

Sheri, on the other hand, got a little freaked about it. She'd started drinking much earlier in the day, she'd had a lot more blow than Patti, and her nerves now were wearing down. She was still laughing at things, but the humor was very thin. "I'll tell you what, girl, these are weird vibes I'm getting today. You know what? I *did* kinda hear like, music. Behind the door …? Now we get this shit!" and she swept her hands at the pages but not touching them, as a woman might try to shoo off a spider. "You know what let's do? Let's have a sleep-over at your place, I'll come sleep over, just like slumber parties."

"That'd be fun! But you sleep in my bed, no kicking, OK?"

Sheri cawed with relieved laughter—her sleep-kicking a joke with them. Sensing Sheri's fear—her desperation not to be alone tonight—scared Patti in turn.

They walked the sidewalks through the almost-night, headlights blazing everywhere, both of them so glad of each other's company it almost embarrassed them.

At the all-night Safeway they got provisions: sloe gin, vodka, bags of ice, 7UP, bags of chips and puffs and cookies and candy bars. They repaired with their purchases to Patti's place.

She had a small cottage in a four-cottage court, with very old people living in the other three units. The girls shoved the bed into the corner so they could drop pillows against all the walls to lean back on. They turned on the radio and the TV, then got out the phone book and started making joke calls to people with funny names while eating, drinking, smoking, watching, listening, and bantering with each other.

Their consciousness outlasted their provisions, but not by long. Soon, back to back, they slept; bathed and laved by the gently burbling soundwash and the ash-grey light of pulsing images.

They woke to a day that was sunny, windy, and smogless. They rose at high, glorious noon and walked to a coffee shop for breakfast. The breeze was combing buttery light into the waxen fronds of the palms, while the Hollywood Hills seemed most opulently brocaded—under the sky's flawless blue—with the silver-green of sagebrush and sumac.

As they ravened breakfast, they plotted borrowing a car and taking a drive. Then Sheri's pimp walked in. She waved him over brightly, but Patti was sure she was as disappointed as herself Rudy took a chair long enough to inform Sheri how lucky she was he'd run into her, since he had something important for her that afternoon. Contemptuously he snatched up the bill and paid for both girls. Sheri left in tow and gave Patti a rueful wave from the door.

Patti's appetite left her. She dawdled over coffee and stepped at last, unwillingly, out into the day's polychrome splendor. Its very clarity took on a sinister quality of remorselessness. Behold, the whole world and all its children moved under the glaring sun's brutal, endless revelation. Nothing could hide. Not in this world … though of course there were other worlds, where beings lie hidden immemorially …

She shivered as if something had crawled across her. The thoughts had passed through Patti, but were not hers. She sat on a bus-stop bench and tightly crossed her arms as if to get a literal hold on herself. The strange thoughts, by their feeling, she knew instinctively to be echoes raised somehow by what they had read last night. Away with them, then! The creep had had more than his money's worth of reading from her already, and now she would forget those unclean pages. As for her depression, it

was a freakish sadness caused by the spoiling of her holiday with Sheri, and it was silly to give in to it.

Thus she rallied herself and got to her feet. She walked a few blocks without aim, somewhat stiff and resolute. At length the sunlight and her natural health of body had healed her mood, and she fell into a pleasant, veering ramble down miles of Hollywood residential streets, relishing the cheap cuteness of the houses and the lushness of their long-planted trees and gardens.

Almost she left the entire city. A happy, rushing sense of her freedom grew upon her, and she suddenly pointed out to herself that she had nearly four hundred dollars in her purse. She came within an ace of swaggering into a Greyhound station with two quickly packed suitcases and buying a ticket to either San Diego or Santa Barbara, whichever had the earlier departure time. With brave suddenness to simplify her life and remove it, at a stroke, from the evil that had seemed to haunt it recently …

In the end, it was Patti's laziness that made her veer from this decision. The packing, the bus ride, the looking for a new apartment, the searching for a job … so many details and hours of tedium! And as she meditated on the toilsomeness of it all, she found that these familiar old Hollywood residential streets were taking on a new allure.

And really, how *could* she leave? After what had it been? Four? Five years? After so long, Hollywood was basically her hometown. These shady little streets with their root-buckled sidewalks—they were so well known to her, yet so full of interest.

She had turned onto a still, green block, gorgeously scented and overhung by huge old peppertrees. She was some few dozen yards into the block before she realized that the freeway had cut it off at the far end. But at that end a black-on-yellow arrow indicated a narrow egress, so she kept walking. Then, several houses ahead, a very large man in overalls appeared, dragging a huge German shepherd across the lawn.

Patti saw a new brown van parked by the curb and recognized it and the man at once. The vehicle was one of two belonging to Fat Face's stray refuge, and the man was one of his two full-time collectors.

He had the struggling brute by the neck with a noosed stick. He stopped and looked at Patti with some intensity as she approached. The vine-drowned cottage whose lawn he stood on was dark, tight-shut, and seemed deserted—as did the entire block—and it struck Patti that the man could

have spotted the dog by chance and might now be thinking it hers. She smiled and shook her head as she came up.

“He’s not mine! I don’t even *live* around here!”

Something in the way her words echoed down the stillness of the street gave Patti a pang. She was sure they had made the collector’s eyes narrow. He was tall, round, and smooth, with a face of his employer’s type, though not as jovial. He was severely clubfooted and bloat-legged on the left, as well as being inordinately bellied, all things to which the coveralls lent a merciful vagueness. The green baseball cap he wore somehow completed the look of ill-balance and slow wit that the man wore.

But as she got nearer, already wanting to turn and run the other way, she received a shocking impression of strength in the uncouth figure. The man had paused in a half turn and was partly crouched—not a position of firm leverage. The dog, whose paws and muzzle showed some Bernard, surely weighed well over a hundred and fifty pounds, and it fought with all its might, but its struggles sent not even a tremor through its captor’s massive arm; the animal was as immovably moored as to a tree. Patti edged to one side of the walk, pretending a wariness of the dog, which its helplessness made droll, and moved to pass. The collector’s hand, as if absently, pressed down on the noose. The beast’s head seemed to swell, its struggles grew more galvanic and constricted by extreme distress. And while thus smoothly he began throttling the beast, the collector cast a glance up and down the block and stepped into Patti’s path, effortlessly dragging the animal with him.

They stood face to face, very near. The ugly mathematics of peril swiftly clicked in her brain; the mass, the force, the time—all were sufficient. The next couple of moments could finish her. With a jerk he could kill the dog, drop it, seize her, and thrust her into the van. Indeed, the dog was at the very point of death. The collector began to smile nastily, and his breath came—foul and oddly cold—gusting against her face. Then something began to happen to his eyes. They were rolling up, like a man’s when he’s coming, but they didn’t roll white; they were rolling up a jet-black—two glossy obsidian globes eclipsing from below the watery blue ones. Her lungs began to gather air to scream. A taxicab swung onto the street.

The collector’s grip eased on the half-unconscious dog. He stood blinking furiously, and it seemed he could not unwind his bulky body from the menacing tension it had taken on. He stood, still frozen on the very

threshold of assault, and the cold foulness still gusted from him with the labor of his breathing. In another instant Patti's reflexes fired and she was released with a leap from the curb out into the street, but there was time enough for her to have the thought she *knew* that stench the blinking gargoyle breathed.

And then she was in the cab. The driver sullenly informed her then of her luck in catching him on his special shortcut to a freeway on-ramp. She looked at him as if he'd spoken in a foreign tongue. More gently he asked her destination, and without thought she answered, "The Greyhound station."

Flight. With sweet, simple motion to cancel Hollywood, and its walking ghosts of murder, and its lurking plunderers of the body, and its nasty, nameless scribblers of letters whose pleasure it was to defile the mind with nightmares. But of course, she must pack. She rerouted the driver to her apartment.

This involved a doubling back that took them across the street of her encounter. The van was still parked by the curb, but neither collector nor dog was in sight. Oddly, the van seemed to be moving slightly, rocking as if with interior movement of fitful vigor. Her look was brief, from a half-block distance, but in the shady stillness the subtle tremoring made a vivid impression.

Then she remembered Fat Face. Of course! She could report the driver to him. His majestic face, his bland avuncular smile—the comforting aura of him flooded soothingly over her fear. What, after all, had happened? A creepy disabled guy with an eye infection had been dangerously tempted to rape her. Fat Face would talk to him. Fat Face would vigorously protect her from any further danger. And meanwhile, in the telling of the story … Patti smiled, planning her pretty embarrassment at the intimate topic; she would express her girlish gratitude so warmly. It would lead smoothly to the tender seduction of her fantasy.

She rerouted the taxi yet again, not without first giving the driver a ten-dollar tip in advance. She had him drop her on the Boulevard. She would cop a little blow and get some donuts before going back to the Parnassus, and across the street to Fat Face.

But instead she spent the rest of the afternoon on the Boulevard. Having kindly Fat Face close on hand to fix things neutralized the terror of the near-rape. Patti believed in finding effective antidotes to her problems. Fat Face,

the remedy, was on hand, so there was no rush about it. She did a couple healthy knuckles full of flake in the ladies' room of Dunkin' Donuts, and then went out and enjoyed two chocolate frosted Old-Fashioneds with thickly creamed coffee. She mused that while there was relief in Fat Face's presence, there was a creepiness about his entire enterprise that was a real obstacle to visiting him, and that she might as well put it off till tomorrow morning and just relax today. It was cruel, of course, to see deformity as creepy—that had to be what was freaking her in Fat Face's building yesterday, and it was unfair, even that huge creep—strangling the dog one-handed, his eyes fixed on her, rolling black—even he deserved sympathy for his deformity. That was what was so great about Fat Face, he was so humanitarian, but the flip side was that his humanitarianism associated him with all these creeps.

She went to a double bill, and then went to another one a block away. She nursed a flat of Peppermint Schnapps and honked discrete knuckles of flake, all snug up in her corner balcony seat, mind-surfing through the bright, delirious tumult of car chases and exploding spacecraft and skull-spraying gunfights and screaming falls from the peaks of skyscrapers. This was relaxation! Her favorite way to spend an afternoon.

But her mood began to falter as the movies ground on. She kept thinking of her almost-attacker. It was not his grotesque image that nagged her so much as it was a fugitively familiar aura he had about him. The more she worked to shake this thought, the more its persistence frightened her and the more vivid grew the haunting sensations. A cold malignance gusted off the man like a breath of some alien world's atmosphere, yet it was an air somehow obscurely known to her. What dream of her own, now lost to her, had shown her that world of dread and wonder and colossal age that now she caught—and knew—the scent of, in this man? The thought was easy to shake off as a freak of mood, but it was insistent in its return, like a fly that kept landing on her. After the movies, when she stepped out onto the sidewalk, the noise and the blaze of neon and head-lights in the dusk made her edgy. She felt cold. It may have been the flake still revving in her system, but her legs seemed to feel a hollow *thrumming*, a big uneasy emptiness somewhere beneath her foot soles. She walked for a while, picking up a new flat of Schnapps. Finally she stepped into a booth and called Sheri.

Her friend had just got home, exhausted from a multiple trick, and wearing a few bruises from a talk afterward with Rudy.

“Why don’t I come over, Sheri? Hey?”

“No, Patti. I’m wrung out, girl. You feel OK?”

“Sure. So get to sleep, then.”

“Naw, hey now—you come over if you want to, Patti, I’m just gonna be dead to the world, is all.”

“Whaddya mean? If you’re tired, you’re tired, and I’ll catch you later. So long.” She could hear, but not change, the anger and disappointment in her own voice. It told her, when she’d hung up but remained staning at the phone, how close to the territory of Fear she stood. Full night had surrounded her glass booth. Against the fresh purple dark, all the street’s scribbly neon squirmed and swam, like sea-things of blue and rose and gold, bannening and twisting cryptically over the drowned pavements.

And, almost as though she expected a watery death, Patti could not, for a moment, step from the booth out onto those pavements. Their lethal cold strangeness lay, if not undersea, then surely in an alien poisonous atmosphere that would scorch her lungs. For a ridiculous instant, her body defied her will.

Then she set her sights on a bar half a block distant. She plunged from the booth and grimly made for that haven.

Some three hours later, no longer cold, Patti was walking to Sheri’s. It was a weeknight, and the stillness of the residential streets was not unpleasant. The tree-crowded streetlamps shed a light that was lovely with its whiskey gloss. The street names on their little banners of blue metal had a comic flavor to her tongue, and she called out each as it came into view.

Sheri, after all, had said to come over. The petty cruelty of waking her seemed, to Patti, under the genial excuse of the alcohol, merely prankish. So she sauntered through sleeping Hollywood, knowing the nightwalker’s exhilaration of being awake in a dormant world.

Sheri lived in a stucco cottage that was a bit tackier than Patti’s, though larger, each cottage possessing a little driveway and a garage in back. And though there was a light on in the living room, it was up the driveway that Patti went, deciding, with sudden impishness, to spook her friend. She crept around the rear corner and stole up to the screened window of Sheri’s bedroom, meaning to make noises through a crack if one had been left open.

The window was in fact fully raised, though a blind was drawn within. Even as Patti leaned close, she heard movement inside the darkened room. In the next instant a gust of breeze came up and pushed back the blind within.

Sheri was on her back in the bed and somebody was on top of her, so that all Patti could see of her was her arms and her face, which stared round-eyed at the ceiling as she was rocked again and again on the bed. Patti viewed that surging, grappling labor for two instants, no more, and retreated, almost staggering, in a primitive reflex of shame more deep-lying in her than any of the sophistications of her adult professional life.

Shame and a weird childish glee. She hurried out to the sidewalk. Her head rang, and she felt giggly and frightened to a degree that managed to astonish her even through her liquor. What was with her? She'd been paid to watch far grosser things than a simple coupling. On the other hand, there had been a foul smell in the bedroom and a nagging hint of music too, she thought, a faint, unpleasant, twisty tune coming from somewhere indefinite …

Those vague feelings quickly yielded to the humorous side of the accident. She walked to the nearest main street and found a bar. In it, she killed half an hour with two further doubles and then, reckoning enough time had passed, walked back to Sheri's.

The living-room light was still on. Patti rang the bell and heard it inside, a rattly probe of noise that raised no stir of response. All at once she felt a light rush of suspicion, like some long-legged insect scuttling daintily up her spine. She felt that, as once before in the last few days, the silence she was hearing concealed a presence, not an absence. But why should this make her begin, ever so slightly, to sweat? It could be Sheri playing possum. Trying by abruptness to throw off her fear, Patti seized the knob. The door opened and she rushed in, calling:

"Ready or not, one, two, three."

Before she was fully in the room, her knees buckled under her, for a fiendish stench filled it. It was a carrion smell, a fierce, damp rankness that bit and pierced her nose. It was so palpable an assault it seemed to crawl all over her—to wriggle through her scalp and stain her flesh as if with brimstone and graveslime.

Clinging still to the doorknob she looked woozily about the room, whose sloppy normality, coming to her as it did through that surreal fetor, struck

her almost eerily. Here was the litter of wrappers, magazines, and dishes—thickest around the couch—so familiar to her. The TV, on low, was crowned with ashtrays and beer cans, while on the couch that it faced lay a freshly opened bag of Fritos.

But it was from the bedroom door, partly ajar, that the nearly visible miasma welled most thickly, as from its source. And it would be in the bedroom that Sheri would lie. She would be lying dead in its darkness. For, past experience and description though it was, the stench proclaimed that meaning grim and clear: death. Patti turned behind her to take a last clean breath and stumbled toward the bedroom.

Every girl ran the risk of rough trade. It was an ugly and lonely way to die. With the dark, instinctive knowledge of their sisterhood, Patti knew that it was only laying out and covening up that her friend needed of her now. She shoved inward on the bedroom door, throwing a broken rhomb of light upon the bed.

It and the room were empty—empty save the near-physical mass of the stench. It was upon the bed that the reek fumed and writhed most nastily. The blankets and sheets were drenched with some vile fluid and pressed into sodden seams and folds. The coupling she had glimpsed and snickered at—what unspeakable species of intercourse had it been? And Sheri's face staring up from under the shadowed form's lascivious rocking—had there been more to read in her expression than the slack-faced shock of sex? Then Patti moaned:

"Oh, Jesus God!"

Sheri was in the room. She lay on the floor, mostly under the bed, only her head and shoulders protruding, her face to the ceiling. There was no misreading its now-frozen look. It was a face wherein the recognition of Absolute Pain and Fear had dawned, even as death arrived. Dead she surely was. Living muscles did not achieve utter fixity. Tears jumped up in Patti's eyes. She staggered into the living room, fell on the couch, and wept. "Oh, Jesus God," she said again; softly, now.

She went to the kitchenette and got a dish towel, tied it around her nose and mouth, and returned to the bedroom. Sheri would not, at least, be half thrust from sight like a broken toy. Her much-used body would have a shred of dignity that her life had never granted it. She bent and hooked her hands under those dear, bare shoulders. She pulled and, with her pull's excess force, fell backward to the floor; for that which she fell hugging to her

breasts needed no such force to move its lightness. It was not Sheri, but a dreadful upper fragment of her, that Patti hugged: Sheri's head and shoulders, one of her arms … gone were her fat, funny feet they used to laugh at, for she ended now in a charred stump of rib cage. As a little girl might clutch some unspeakable doll, Patti lay embracing tightly that which made her scream, and scream again.

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Valium. Compazine. Mellaril. Stelazine. Gorgeous technicolored tabs and capsules. Bright-hued pillars holding up the Temple of Rest. Long afternoons of Tuinal and TV; night sweats and quiet, groggy mornings. Patti was in County for more than a week.

She had found all there was to be found of her friend. Dismemberment by acid was a new wrinkle, and Sheri got some press, but in a world of trashbag murders and mass graves uncovered in quiet backyards, even a death like Sheri's could hope for only so much coverage. Patti's bafflement made her call the detectives assigned to the case at least once a day. With gruff tact they heard through her futile rummagings among the things she knew of Sheri's life and background, but soon knew she was helpless to come up with anything material.

Much as Patti craved the medicated rest the hospital thrust on her, a lingering dread marred her days of drug-buoyed case. For she could be waked, even from the glassiest daze, by a sudden sense that the number of people surrounding her was dwindling—that everywhere they were stealing off, or vanishing, and that the hospital, and even the city, was growing empty around her.

She put it down to the hospital itself—its constant shifts of bodies, its wheelings in and out on silent gurneys. She obtained a generous scrip for Valium and had herself discharged, hungry for the closer comfort of her friends. A helpful doctor was leaving the building as she did, and gave her a ride. With freakish embarrassment about her trade and her world, Patti had him drop her at a coffee shop some blocks from the Parnassus. When he had driven off, she started walking. The dusk was just fading. It was Saturday night, but it was also the middle of a three-day weekend (as she had learned with surprise from the doctor) and the traffic on both pavement and asphalt was remarkably light.

Somehow it had a small-town-on-Sunday feel, and alarm woke in her and struggled in its heavy Valium shackles, for this was as if the confirmation of

her frightened hallucinations. Her fear mounted as she walked. She pictured the Parnassus with an empty lobby and imagined that she saw the traffic beginning everywhere to turn off the street she walked on, so that in a few moments it might stretch deserted for a mile either way.

But then she saw the many lively figures through the beloved plate-glass windows. She half ran ahead, and as she waited with happy excitement for the light, she saw Fat Face up in his window. He spotted her just when she did him, and beamed and winked. Patti waved and smiled and heaved a deep sigh of relief that nearly brought tears. This was true medicine, not pills, but friendly faces in your home community! Warm feelings and simple neighborliness! She ran forward at the WALK signal.

There was a snag before she reached the lobby, for Arnold from his wooden cave threw at her a leer of wet intensity that scared her even as she recognized that some kind of frightened greeting was intended by the grimace. There was such … *speculation* in his look. But then she had pushed through the glass doors, and was in the warm ebullience of shouts and hugs and jokes and droll nudges.

It was sweet to bathe in that bright, raucous communion. She had called the deskman that she was coming out, and for a couple of hours various friends whom the word had reached strolled in to greet her. She luxuriated in her pitied celebrity, received little gifts, and gave back emotional kisses of thanks.

It ought to have lasted longer, but the night was an odd one. Not much was happening in town, and everybody seemed to have action lined up in Oxnard or Encino or some other bizarre place. A few stayed to work the home grounds, but they caught a subdued air from the place’s emptiness at a still-young hour. Patti took a couple more Valium and tried to seem like she was peacefully resting in a lobby chair. To fight her stirrings of unease, she took up the paperback that was among the gifts given her—she hadn’t even noticed by whom. It had a horrible face on the cover and was entitled *At the Mountains of Madness*.

If she had not felt the need for some potent distraction, some weighty ballast for her listing spirit, she would never have pieced out the Ciceronian rhythms of the narrative’s style. But when, with frightened tenacity, she had waded several pages into the tale, the riverine prose, suddenly limpid, snatched her and bore her upon its flowing clarity. The Valium seemed to perfect her uncanny concentration, and where her vocabulary failed her, she

made smooth leaps of inference and always landed square on the necessary meaning.

And so for hours in the slowly emptying lobby that looked out upon the slowly emptying intersection, she wound through the icy territories of the impossible and down into the gelid nethermost cellars of all World and Time, where stupendous aeons lay in pictured shards, and massive sentient forms still stirred, and fed, and mocked the light.

Strangely, she began to find underlinings about two-thirds of the way through. All the marked passages involved references to shoggoths. It was a word whose mere sound made Patti's flesh stir. She searched the flyleaf and inner covers for explanatory inscriptions, but found nothing.

When she laid the book down in the small hours, she sat amid a near-total desertion that she scarcely noticed. Something tugged powerfully at memory, something that memory dreaded to admit. She realized that in reading the tale, she had taken on an obscure, terrible weight. She felt as if impregnated by an injection of tainted knowledge whose grim fruit, an almost physical mass of cryptic threat, lay a-ripening in her now.

She took a third-floor room in the Parnassus for the night, for the simplest effort, like calling a cab, lay under a pall of futility and sourceless menace. She lay back, and her exhausted mind plunged instantly through the rotten flooring of consciousness, straight down into the abyss of dreams.

She dreamed of a city like Hollywood, but the city's walls and pavements were half alive, and they could feel premonitions of something that was drawing near them. All the walls and streets of the city waited in a cold-sweat fear under a blackly overcast sky. She herself, Patti grasped, was the heart and mind of the city. She lay in its midst, and its vast, cold fear was hers. She lay, and somehow she knew the things that were drawing near her giant body. She knew their provenance in huge, blind voids where stood walls older than the present face of Earth; she knew their long cunning toll to reach her own cringing frontiers. Giant worms they were, or jellyfish, or merely huge clots of boiling substance. They entered her deserted streets, gliding convergingly. She lay like carrion that lives and knows the maggots' assault on it. She lay in her central citadel, herself the morsel they sped toward, piping their lust from foul, corrosive jaws.

She woke late Sunday afternoon, drained and dead of heart. She sat in bed watching a big green fly patiently hammer itself against the windowpane where the gold light flooded in. Endlessly it fought the

impossible, battering with its frail bejeweled head. With swift fury and pain, Patti jumped out of bed and snatched up her blouse. She ran to the window and, with her linen bludgeon, killed the fly.

Across the street, in a window just one story higher than her own, sat Fat Face. She stood looking back for a moment, embarrassed by her little savagery, but warmed by the way the doctor's smile was filled with gentle understanding, as if he read the anguish the act was born of. She suddenly realized she was wearing only her bra.

His smile grew a shade merrier at her little jolt of awareness, and she knew he understood this too, that this was inadvertence, and not a hooker's come-on.

And so, with a swift excitement, she turned it into coquetry and applied her blouse daintily to her breasts. This was the natural moment—she had been right to wait because now her tender fantasy would bloom with perfect spontaneity. She pointed to herself with a smile, and then to Fat Face with inquiry. How he beamed then! Did she even see his eyes and lips water? He nodded energetically. With thumb and forefinger she signaled a short interval. As she left the window she noted the arrival, down the sidewalk, of a gaggle of hydrotherapy patients, several with leashed strays in tow.

It chilled her somewhat. And would the patients' arrival interfere with the intimate interview she imagined? Her preparations slowed. She stepped down to the lobby some ten minutes later and walked slowly to stand by the front doors. The lobby was empty and so were the sidewalks. All lay in a sunny Sunday desolation. It was dreamlike, beautiful in a way, but it caused her a delicate shudder, too. She stepped outside and looked around her—and felt suddenly the craziness of kinky sexual charities such as she intended. Maybe she should forget it, just go party somewhere. And right then, as she stood there, a car full of her friends pulled up to the curb in front of her. In a chorus they invited her to join them. They were off to cruise, maybe crash out of town, had some parties they knew about.

Almost, Patti went. But then she noted that Sheri's kid sister Penny was in the car. She shuddered at so near a reminder and waved them off with a laugh. She began to move down the sidewalk, weighing how strong her urge to visit Fat Face still was, not looking up toward him because maybe she would just walk on down to the bar … And then Arnold lurched from his booth and made a grab for her arm.

She was edgy and quick, and jumped away. He seemed to fear leaving the booth's proximity and came no nearer, but pleaded with her from where he stood:

"Please, Patti! Come here and listen."

Like a thunderbolt, the elusive memory of last night now struck Patti. "Shoggoth" was eerie, and that whole story familiar, because they were precisely what that letter had been all about! She was stunned that she could so utterly banish from her mind that lurid document. It had spooked Patti badly the night before her friend died. It had come from Arnold—and so had that book! That was the meaning of his look. The red moronic face glared at her urgently.

"Please, Patti. I've had knowledge. Come here—" He darted forward to catch her arm and she sprang back, again the quicker, with a yelp. Arnold, thus drawn from the screening of his booth, froze fearfully. Patti looked up, and thrilled to find Fat Face looking down—not in amity, but in wrath upon Arnold. The newsman gaped and mumbled apologetically, as if to the sidewalk: "No. I said nothing. I only *hinted* …" Joyfully, Patti sprang across the street and in moments was flying up those green-carpeted stairs she had climbed once before with such reluctance.

The oppression she had first found in these muted corridors was not gone from them—the quality of dread in some manner belonged there—but she outran it. She moved too quickly in her sunny fantasy to be overtaken by that heaviness. She ran down the fourth-floor hall and, at the door where Sheri had knelt giggling and she had balked, seized the knob and knocked simultaneously while pushing her way in, so impetuous was her rush toward benign sanity. There Fat Face sat at a big desk by the window she'd always known him through. He was even grosser-legged and more bloat-bellied than his patients. It gave her a funny shock that did not change her amorous designs.

He wore a commodious doctor's smock and slacks. His shoes were bulky, black, and orthopedically braced. Such a body less enkindled by spirit might have repelled. His, surmounted by the kindly beacon of his smile, seemed only grandfatherly, afflicted—dear. From somewhere there came, echoing as in a large enclosed space, a noise of agitated water and of animals—strangely conjoined. But Fat Face was speaking:

"My dear," he said, not yet rising, "you make an old, old fellow very, very happy!" His voice was a marvel that sent half-lustful gooseflesh down

her spine. It was an uncanny voice, reedy and wavering and shot with flutelike notes of silver purity, sinfully melodious. That voice knew seductions, quite possibly, that Patti had never dreamed of. She was speechless, and spread her arms in tender self-preservation.

He sprang to his feet, and the surging pep with which his great bulk moved sent a new thrill down the lightning rod of her nerves. On pachydermous legs he leapt spry as a cat to a door behind his desk, and bowed her through. The noise of animals and churning water gusted fresher from the doorway. Perplexed, she entered.

The room contained only a huge bowl-shaped hydrotherapy tub. Its walls were blank cement, save one, which was a bank of shuttered windows through which the drenched clamor was pouting. She finally conquered disbelief and realized a fact she had been struggling with all along: those dozens of canine garglings and cat shrieks were sounds of agony and distress. Not hospital sounds. Torture chamber sounds. The door boomed shut with a strikingly ponderous rumble, followed by a sharp click. Fat Face, energetically unbuttoning his smock, said, “Go ahead and peek out, sweet heedless trollop! Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes—soon we’ll *all* dine on lovely flesh-men and women, not paltry vermin!”

Patti gaped at the lurid musicality of his speech, struggling to receive its meaning. The doctor was shucking his trousers. It appeared that he wore a complex rubber suit, heavily strapped and buckled, under his clothes. Dazed, Patti opened a shutter and looked out. She saw a huge indoor pool, as the sounds had suggested, but not of the same shape and bnightly chlorinated blue she expected. It was an awesome slime-black grotto that opened below her, bordered by rude sea-bearded rocks of Cyclopean size. The sooty, viscous broth of its waters boiled with bulging elephantine shapes …

From those shapes, when she had grasped them, she tore her eyes with desperate speed; long instants too late for her sanity. Nightmare ought not to be so simply there before her, so dizzyingly adjacent to Reality. That the shapes should be such seething plasms, such cunning titan maggots as she had dreamed of, this was just half the horror. The other half was the human head that decorated each of those boiling multimorphs, a comic excrescence from the nightmare mass—this and the rain of panicked beasts that fell from cagework above the pool and became in their frenzies both the toys and the food of the pulpy abominations.

She turned slack-mouthed to Fat Face. He stood by the great empty tub working at the system of buckles on his chest. “Do you understand, my dear? Please try! Your horror will improve your tang. *Your veil shall be the wash of blood that dims and drowns your dying eyes* … You see, we find it easier to hold most of the shape with suits like these. We could mimic the entire body, but far more effort and concentration would be required.”

He gave a last pull, and the row of buckles split crisply open. Ropy purple gelatin gushed from his suit front into the tub. Patti ran to the door, which had no knob. As she tore her nails against it and screamed, she remembered the fly at the window, and heard Fat Face continue behind her:

“So, we just imitate the head, and we never dissolve it, not to risk resuming it faultily and waking suspicions. Please struggle!”

She looked back and saw huge palps, like dreadful comic phalluses, spring from the tub of slime that now boiled with movement. She screamed.

“Oh yes!” fluted the Fat Face that now bobbed on the purple simmer. Patti’s arms smoked where the palps took them. She was plucked from the floor as lightly as a struggling roach might be. “Oh yes, dear girl—*you’ll have for bridesmaids Pain and Dread, for vows you’ll jabber blasphemies* …” As he brought her to hang above the cauldron of his acid body, she saw his eyes roll jet-black. He lowered her feet into himself. A last time before shock took her, Patti threw the feeble tool of her voice against the massive walls. She kicked as her feet sank into the scorching gelatin, kicked till her shoes dissolved, till her feet and ankles spread nebulae of liquefying flesh within the Shoggoth Lord’s greedy substance. Then her kicking slowed, and she sank more deeply in.…

NEMO ME IMPUNE LACESSIT

> “The Montresors,” I replied, “were a great and numerous family.”
>
> “I forget your arms.”
>
> “A huge human foot d’or, in a field azure: the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel.”
>
> “And the motto?”
>
> “*Nemo me impune lacessit*.”
>
> – Edgar Allan Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado”

What were my feelings to see their rental car swing, shadow-dappled, up the curving drive that windy afternoon? To see them climb out and squint up at the uncouth façade of my beloved Sternbrucke, and to know that they—and especially *those two* of them—were delivered at last into my hands? Ah, sweet tumult of my heart! On the sward the great horsechestnuts roared like bonfires in the bright blue gale, each one of them a cheering multitude, and still the soul within me out-roared and out-rejoiced them all! What ecstasy of the flesh comes near that first savor of revenge arrived-at, assured?

As they stretched their legs and scanned the house and grounds, their posturings displayed bored ease, or droll disbelief, and yet there was an edge of nervous excess in their pantomimes. How could they not feel out of place? How could they help but half-perceive their own vapid gaudiness on the threshold of that centuried grandeur?

Of course *she* queened it with panache enough—my wife-that-was, my Valerie—or was there a head-toss too many to accord with genuine blitheness? Her stallion, her paramour the Porno Prince, yawned frequently to advertise that Sternbrucke fit him ill, but that it was no greater matter than a sports-jacket that pinched under the arms. His was the dimmest if plainest unease. Natalie, my ex-sister-in-law, viewed the house truculently. She resented any thing or person that failed to propitiate energetically her aggrieved sense of personal worth, and no doubt Sternbrucke, in being strange to her, committed the error of making her feel her ignorance. Perhaps Bo Beck, the fat and bearded fourth, was least perturbed, making

his survey and wincing wryly, as at a cliché. He was the sound-and-camera man, and I was glad of his ease, for he was the first of my day's projects.

"Even thus," I murmured, watching them, "with arrogant preenings, do the bright-plumed, small-brained birds flutter condescending to the limed branch." I left the window and went down to them, down to the indignity of their mocking underestimation of me. To them I was an oddball, bookish cuckold; a gaunt, Old World-ly man of late middle age who was still so infatuated with the remorseless young beauty who had misused him, that he now permitted new and grotesque indignities to be visited upon himself, just to bring her near again.

A bitter role, yet I went down almost merrily to play it. I who have wrested man's deepest lore from its thousand crypts, and tirelessly sifted, through decades and decades of labor, the deep debris of human history and more-than-human history—I whose age alone they were not near suspecting, leaving aside all else … I cheerfully put on the cap-and-bells. Let the king, the sacker-of-cities, play out his last cringing scene as the fool of his wife's suitors—though of course, Valerie was no Penelope!

They in their uneasy arrogance, I in my harsh, antic mood, we made quite a little ceremony of their welcoming-in. They entered singly, meeting Sternbrucke's grim challenge with unconscious pomp, and I gave each a bow and hostly rictus of greeting and self-deprecation. Now, in the golden aftermath of my fulfillment, I remember their first entries as I would: a scene from a beloved play:

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VALERIE (she has a long-limbed flamingo strut, her russet hair cascading like her laughter): "Jesus, Monty! How come you never told me about this place, sweetheart? I mean hey—talk about family secrets. I mean, just that staircase by itself-you see it, Kamin?"

MR. QUARTZ (he gives her a weary nod, and me another): "How's it going?" (He has a drifting walk, a cool bodily denial of effort, and he keeps his Lotario face at rest, holding his handsomeness still and unwrinkled, as one might do with water cupped in his hands.)

NATALIE: "You've got to be kidding, Monty! No hints, now; there's a hunchback butler, right? Or else he's a cycle-ops, one eye, right?" (She's a leggy stork after her sister's flamingo, but she is proud of this because she takes it as a proof of Intellect. Soon she will be dragging out the little French she knows to murder it publicly for my edification.)

BO BECK: “Hello, Professor. It all just knocks my hat flat off! I mean I am sincerely blown away. You never had a film crew here before? A terrible, terrible waste!” (He’s the teasing, malevolent type of pachyderm, glossy-bearded like a Neronian senator. He brings up the rear of the gaggle, which I lead with bows, and strained little chortles, and cringes of anxiety to please, into the western drawing room.)

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Yes, my own performance was the canniest of that whole scenario, for all that they thought themselves to be the Show People, and took me for a dazzled spectator. I gave Valerie furtive, doleful glances, and received witticisms about the room’s “gothic” quality (all its appointments are Baroque) with nervous, pained smiles. I played—and to a turn!—the agonized Man of Culture enthralled by unaccustomed Passion and struggling to ingratiate himself with people who violate his every canon of taste. A droll and forlorn figure.

I summoned Koboldus to take up their luggage and bring us cocktails. His form is that of an elderly, thick-set little man; nothing more bizarre, to Natalie’s disappointment. However, as that which he is in truth possesses a Voice that may not be disguised, he is, to outsiders, mute, and when Natalie learned this she squawked with self-confirmation. Bo Beck bet me rallyingly that I had a basement—no! Not just a basement, catacombs, right?

“They’re not catacombs, Mr. Beck,” I answered. “Few bones, I’m afraid. Heh heh. They’re just cellars, but they are quite extensive and complex, and full of … atmosphere, if that’s what you mean.”

Something, perhaps nothing more than Beck’s having scored a point, touched off Natalie. She planted herself in front of me.

“You know, Monty,” she said, “whether they’re cellars or catacombs or subway tunnels, I’ve just got to be up front with you. I think the whole *premise* of this movie is a loser! How could you let Roger talk you into such a thing? Sex and horror—they don’t *make* it! When Roger phoned us about this I told him: ‘Roger, you might just as well do a porno at Marineland or a porno musical, or any other damn dumb thing, because these two concepts just don’t go together! They don’t *do* anything for each other, and you’re going to have the audience—’”

She would have gone on, for she loved to quote herself, but plump Beck squelched her with aplomb:

“You’re beating a dead horse, Nattie, give it a rest. Here we are, right? What I don’t see the point of is the set. It’s like an upstairs chapel, with a stained-glass window, right?”

I nodded.

“So why did we come so far for horror just to shoot all our heavy inserts in a bleeping church? You get my meaning. A church we could’ve found up the street from the studio, and no plane tickets necessary. It seems to me the heavy stuff should be set in the cellars or some place like that.”

Unctuous as a mortician, I soothed him: “I think, Mr. Beck, that you should see the ‘chapel’ before deciding to abandon Roger’s plans. I’d be glad to show it to you now, in fact.”

There was a freshening of drinks, and then they all trooped after me up the stairs. It is a considerable walk to the north wing. The sombre hangings, the onyx statues darker than the darkness of the alcoves that shelter them, the carven wainscotting where satyrs and grimmer things dance through alien foliage—all these seemed to oppress my friends, or perhaps Sternbrucke wafted them some faint premonition, and each of them caught the far-off scent of his fate in those corridors. For my guests grew plaintive and snappish as we walked, like ill-tempered children who don’t quite know what vexes them. My Valerie complained about the lines that she and Kamin had been assigned by Roger. Kamin added a grunt which, for him, spoke volumes, and Natalie was quick to take up the cudgels for her sister.

“My God, Monty, what does it matter *what* they say? This stuff is not even pronouncable! It’s gibberish! So they’re supposed to be saying some witchcraft gobbledy-gook? Any gobbledy-gook will do! Who cares? Why on earth that sonofabitch Roger had to drag us all out here, and has the nerve to not even be here to explain what he wanted …” Her voice petered out along with her syntax. I had thrown open the door to the ‘chapel.’

I have had other outsiders there. The statuettes, the woven hangings, the tripodia and their smoldering censers of lurid wrought gold, the obsidian monstrances displaying their nameless hosts, the carpet seething with unearthly and immemorial designs—these have always cast their spell, but always it has been the window, my treasured Portal—polychromatic, vertiginously lustrous—which has rapt their gaze and sealed their lips in silences longer than they knew. My friends were silent now. The window faces east and the spring sun, just then attaining zenith, smote its colors into a frenzy which only the May Eve moon, rising full tonight, would surpass.

The impact was such, my friends' silence was so extraordinary, I felt a sudden danger of awakening their dread. Even the littlest minds, sunk in petty pride of self, are susceptible to chords struck on the cosmic scale. I dared not let their wonder crystallize, and so I stepped inside and made my manner brisker, gave it a smugly taunting note:

"Well! It seems horror is not so demodé after all, eh, Natalie? Don't feel alone in your uneasiness—I promise you it frightens all my guests. Actually, when one has done a bit of reading, and the various symbolisms of all my toys are understood …" I trailed off with a condescending chuckle that brought them into the room after me like pups for biscuits. Natalie began a roving inspection punctuated with squawks of laughter, and Kamin actually sauntered about quite energetically to demonstrate his comfort in the place. Bo Beck began handling things with snorts and exclamations (though he desisted willingly enough when I reverted to the fussy curator and pleaded that he touch nothing), while my Valerie, most extravagant of all, went and lay down on the velvet-draped dais that was to support their filmed carnalities that night at moonrise. She stretched out and struck langorous, sensual postures, alternately giggling and practicing orgasmic whines and groans.

She supposed she was torturing me, and I seized the opportunity, with enthralled glances, to give the impression she was. In fact I was experiencing my final liberation from enthrallment. As she writhed there, I saw plainly the little she was, and I marveled. Could this small, stupid mammal actually have chained and mesmerized a man who had seen two centuries of human life and spanned far vaster gulfs of ultra-human time and space? By the Old Ones and the Elder! What an ape is the wisest man! The greatest scholars, perennial monkeys! Had I not abandoned, for nearly three years, my vital priestly labors? Did I not become an utter stranger to Sternbrucke and dwell in more than one mindless maelstrom of modernity amid the tube-battening, freeway-creeping, gibberish-howling yahoos of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles? Did I not play the well-heeled bibliophile amidst a dozen hellish circles of purse-proud fools—and all to woo, and win, and sustain in bliss this fidgeting, self-adoring gypsy posing on blue velvet? How she had taunted me, had used our bed for humiliations, for farcical mockeries, for occasional charities! I was patient, and struggled to educate her to fairness and respect. Oh, our many talks! But she, being born to money, and college "educated," and loving only herself—she found

that the greatest pleasure lay in defying all that reason and decency expected of her. To become the “Queen of X”—here was freedom and accomplishment! Here was the proof of her beauty’s transcendence of all the boring laws and codes of the less-than-beautiful!

As I say, I knew my freedom then, and discovered in my heart that time had at last delivered me from my infatuation. I was indeed purified for the performance of the sacraments I had planned. The offering would be yielded up with priestly fervor, as is fitting, and those from whose service I had been renegade would be appeased by that which had seduced me.

At length we returned to the west wing, where Koboldus served drinks and fed rock albums to the stereo. I had bought both machine and records expressly for the occasion. My guests mocked many of my selections, but delighted in the incongruity of such a mechanism and such a music here. Valerie danced, mainly with Bo Beck, as Kamin disliked such undignified agitation of his studly frame. The portly photographer had a real comic genius for lewd pantomimes woven into the free-form strut then popular. Koboldus kept the drinks unostentatiously plentiful, and soon a raucous conversation raged, composed almost entirely of defamation of absent persons. And the music hammered on, whittling down the day according to the ingenious shape of my designs.

When two hours had passed, I set in motion my first little arrangement. Bo Beck had, with Roger, done much to flatter and persuade Valerie into her first experiments with what they called the “porno genre.” He was, intrinsically, a loathsome being—I say it with strict impartiality, scorning to drum up justification for my revenge, which I would proudly pursue against an angel, if he wronged me. When I turned to this man, however, and casually laid my bait before him, I conceived as it were a poeticized image of what I was about to do. I imagined a huge, blood-swollen tick being crushed between my thumbnails.

The bait I speak of? So simple, and so infallible! With genial naïveté I told him that his asking about my cellars earlier was quite a coincidence. Roger had also asked, and had been intensely interested on learning of the ancient apparatuses of torture and inquisition that they still contained. He had in fact tentatively proposed to pay me well if I would permit, in the near future, a second filming at Sternbrucke. He would shoot it in the cellars—something he called a “snuff” film.

Beck might have been an automaton, so precise were his responses. He rose and tersely pointed out to his friends that it was time to final-rehearse their difficult lines. He stilled Natalie's outburst of renewed complaint with one masterfully raised palm, and briskly set up for her the tape deck with which they were to play their practice tape. (I'd had Roger make it just before he was "called away," and the first hard vocables chilled me with remembered transports of revenge: *Cthulhu fhtagn, nngyah! nngyah!*) He delivered a last admonition about the relative nearness of moonrise and then ushered me out for a stroll around the grounds, "to dig the grass and trees and everything."

Of course, I knew his ambition to grow wealthy through "snuff" films quite as well as I knew what kind of films those were. Roger's interest in making them was my invention—so much of poor Roger's part in all this was. As for Bo, his envy of his producer's recent, modest fortune was obvious to any who observed them, while his ambitions had been revealed a year or so earlier when he had attempted a surreptitious use of Roger's capital and equipment to launch himself in the blood-and-sex "genre." Only Beck's skills as a technician, and his desperate, apologetic arse-kissing, had prevented his discovery from leading to a dismissal by the enraged producer.

Thus, to precipitate the cameraman's still-rankling greed and bitterness into impulsive action was no great matter. I needed only to appear to have been interested by Roger's "offer," and to quote as the sum proposed by him an amount I knew Beck could easily overmatch. He scarely pretended to notice the windblown greens of sward and trees, all lambent with the latening sun. Quick to his purpose, he was soon probing me with questions:

"A bastinado? A strappado? I know you're putting me on, Monty. You say an Iron Maiden and oubliettes too? Real oubliettes? I mean, right there, that's hard to believe. Those things are medieval, right? This house isn't that old!"

"I did not suspect the breadth of your reading, Bo!" I cried. "You're a downright scholar in these matters!" (I could afford to goad him a bit now.) "In fact, Sternbrucke's upper structures are scarcely more than three hundred years old—there was an unfortunate local disturbance at the turn of the seventeenth century and the place burned down. The undamaged understructures were incorporated into the new building, and they date from

the tenth century, if not earlier. The main entry to them is over there, just off the courtyard. Do you care to test your disbelief?”

When we came to the stairhead of the cellars it almost frightened him, that gaping well of masonry with those rough and cruelly pitched steps belonging so palpably to a darker and more remorseless Age of Man. There would be another stairwell more dreadful than this, where his fear would have to be dealt with, but here a faltering could abort the entire scenario. The colossal scale and druidic harshness of that stonework can pierce even ignorance like Beck’s with an almost visceral awareness of antiquity. The man reeled, ever so slightly, as he stood in that first cold gust from Sternbrucke’s lower regions. It was my fortune that his professional sense of visual impact was more violently aroused than whatever fear of the Immemorial he may have conceived. I took a flash from a chest just inside the threshold, and we fairly plunged in, Beck hastening ahead, pausing at turnings to probe various perspectives with the light and talking without cease.

Partly his eagerness was his greed, for as a cinematic setting of the genre amusingly known as “gothic,” those corridors and passages and vaulted chambers are probably unequaled throughout the continent. But partly his feverishness was also his fear. I suppose I must say that he did not quite yet know that he was afraid.

“Jumping Jesus!” he said. “It’s friggin’ unreal. Look at the iron in those doors! And those statues in their cubbyholes … (What *are* those things, anyway?) I mean, this place is a movie already! Another turn? Will you look at how far these things go, in all directions! Down again!? You’re not serious. And just listen to how my voice echoes! You get a sound kind of like nasty laughing far away—Christ, if we can just pick that up! (How far *do* these things go?) And that crusty stuff oozing out of the ceilings … it’s like Vincent Price, right? Under a river? You mean we’re already below that valley in back of your place? Incredible! I’d put torches all along these halls. Hell, I could get some inserts from Val and Kamin down here before we take off tomorrow! They’d be a sideplot, and I’d only have to come back once more for the snuff. How deep did they keep those torture rooms anyway?”

His voice poured on, fell spattering and rippling away from us through those centuried darknesses until our light-beam blundered into a yet more terrible darkness just ahead of us. We had reached the juncture. There, stark,

atavistic fear wrenched shut the spigot of Beck's words. Only his uneven breathing was heard as we came to the stairhead and looked down those ragged, reeking stairs.

This I had foreseen, for how could he not be moved? Down there the stonework changes character, because those ultimate, deepest corridors were not dug by the inhabitants of the ancient maze, but rather met their diggings. Other workers had fashioned the staircase and sunken halls it led to; other artisans had incised those brine-foul stones with the bas-reliefs that sardonically twisted on them still; workers and artisans from the sea, some five miles distant, toiling to meet their kin and colleagues under the earth.

When I thrust the strong beam down that stairwell and made the squiddish throngs dance shadowed on the stone, and when the numbing, oceanic gust of salty, sunken grottoes and immemorial decay breathed up against us, I felt the cameraman's spirit wince and recoil within him.

Speedily I feigned a debilitating chill and drew an ample silver flask from my smoking-jacket. The rum in it was luscious, liquid fire, a hundred and fifty proof. I mimed a deeper draught than actually I took. I offered Beck the flask, and he tried to feign a shallower draught than his bobbing throat attested to. Almost immediately he took a second dose which abandoned pretense and half-emptied the flask.

He was not accustomed to admitting sourceless terror to himself, but no man in his wits is impervious to such sense of age-long *presence* as flows up that stairwell at the juncture. He used the liquor impulsively to bludgeon into quiescence his humiliating attack of fear, but it was too light a club for his purpose. The drink only stunned his dismay, as revealed by the stiffness of his gait going down those mist-slick stairs. Midway he stopped and vented his unease in anger:

"Look, I don't need a hike! How much further is it!? Jesus Christ, it's cold! It stinks like … like … it *stinks,* for Christ's sake! Look, do you really have a rack or an oubliette or any of that crap? What about all those other doors we passed? This some kind of goose-chase?"

The alcohol seemed to be taking a slightly more palpable hold on him. I played the surest gambit. I gasped with vexation at myself for having brought him here, for not noticing how much it frightened—well, not frightened of course, but bothered him. We must go back at once. Naturally I had the articles we'd spoken of, but they could wait. Roger had had precisely the same reaction, and he had turned back before this.

Bo Beck boomed jocose obscenities, called me a great joker, and disclaimed anything but utter fascination for these unbelievable “layouts” of mine. He swaggered in the lead the rest of the way down. I was solicitous about the chill and gave him the flask, which he had emptied before we had gone another hundred yards.

Then he was numbed, splendidly numbed. He waxed voluble, humorously intimate, and I was privileged to view the Inner Man. He told me he had always thought I was a weird old type, but genuinely profound. He told me that Valerie was “strictly meat-parade.” He confided that he had himself often enjoyed her favors and hoped amiably that there were no hard feelings.

He told me that sex meant nothing anymore. Death films were the new wave. He boasted that he was prepared to film them with new scope and imagination. By the pit! I hear him still, hear his little meeping, tittering foulnesses echoing so punily amid the contortions of Cthulhuic art that flanked us. How satanic he fancied himself, how *powerful* in what he flattered himself was his Evil. Ha ha! His piddling amoral impulsiveness, Evil? The creatures on the torch-stirred walls preceded us with fluid coilings and liquid leaps, a transcosmic advance guard, leading our steps with lurid glee. I wanted to dance for very exaltation and pinch the sweaty cheeks of my meaty sacrifice. The door was in sight.

“They’re as good as dead already,” he explained with sudden enthusiasm. “I mean syphilis, worms, TB, some of ’em really retarded, cancer, you name it. They’re just making a little money instead of dying for nothing a little later on! I mean, bluntly, they’re trash-meat, right? And this way they can leave a little something to their *mamacita* or whatever, dig?”

We stood before the iron, rune-decked door. I shot the bolt, but did not yet push inward on the door. I smirked at my guest. I leered in his face and it shocked him, for he had never known me as other than self-effacing. “Trash-meat,” I said. “That is poetry, Mr. Beck. You are a poet. Trash-meat, hollowed out of soul, empty of mind, a rack of beef that speaks, eats, drinks, eliminates, and makes money—or tries to.”

He stood murderously quiet, narrowing his pig’s eyes in a way that was meant to frighten me. Compliantly, I cringed against the door, the overweening pedant suddenly fearful of the stronger man. Smiling fiercely, he crowded upon me. I heaved with my shoulder and we stumbled inside

together, and after he was in I shouldered home the door and tripped the latch.

I stood calm again, needing no more pretense, and held the light on him while he—why, he had forgotten my insult in the stench of the huge chamber, the dreadful fetor into which he had dived, and he actually staggered and leaned against the wall. He clutched his belly, gagging, and, uncontainably, he vomited upon the stone. I turned away and spoke the fire-syllable, causing the torches that ringed the great round room to ignite.

When his bowels were still and he straightened, pale and shaken, to look around him, he was only distracted from his amazement at the torches by the rusted gratings inset everywhere in the quarter-acre floor, and by the huge, crusted altar that dominated its center. With a sweeping gesture I cried out merrily to him:

“Behold! did I lie to you? Oubliettes! Very ancient ones, too, Mr. Beck, and far deeper, far more … *commodious* than the norm. Oh yes! And, dear Mr. Beck, do you know what, by all the Old and Elder Gods? Can you guess? These oubliettes, they are *in use*. Genuine and ancient prisoners they hold. *Authentic!* Oh, yes, *authentic* past all your guessing. Do you know what a shoggoth is? Would you care to meet one?”

“No!” He screamed it—I thought it would split his throat, that cracked howl. For, under the ring of my taunts, he had heard, you see, had heard the titan stir and slosh that welled up, with greater stench, from those iron gratings. And he, as I, had felt the viscous shifting of an elephantine mass against the basalt foundations of the floor we stood on.

And he didn’t doubt those premonitions, not he! They were too unmistakable. Even as he glared at me, his jaw broken-hinged, the silken roll and thud, as of a captive surf, reverberated beneath us and resonated up bur legs. He moaned.

“What?” I crooned. “Is Mr. Beck disturbed? Does he want to sell his ticket back and leave the show? Listen to this!”

In a more strident voice, I called out to the floor:

“Kar-datt, shoggoth! *Hin*-gyah, *Hin*-gyah!”

The tearing sound of watery suction surged from the gratings anew, and a dense miasmus of foul reek burgeoned from the same source. Bo Beck turned and clawed the door, which did not move. I cried out to him:

“How can you decline to meet the shoggoth? So authentic and unique a being as it is! Come, say you’ll welcome the shoggoth’s embrace? It longs

to clasp you, it gets out so little!”

Again he screamed, without articulation now. He clawed the latch so desperately that the blood welled and rivered from his ruined fingers, and his fumblings made a slippery, ratlike sound against the rude iron.

“Oh, well,” I said. “You’ll need the key, if you insist on leaving.” I held it up, and he rushed toward me with the suddenness of a boar breaking cover. I threw the key, and its silver arc through the firelight ended ringingly atop the altar.

He stopped, waited one shuddering breath, and veered toward the altar, his horror of remaining in the room overcoming his dread of penetrating to its center. Even as he ran I uttered the necessary syllable, and the largest of the gratings rose groaning on its hinge and gaped erect. Beck plunged with a whimper upon the great dais of ensanguined stone, and in that instant the ebon geyser of the shoggoth fountained from the opened pit. It poured with oceanic swiftness to surround the altar, blackly foaming, piping with shrill, delerious cosmic greed.

It towered and belled out above the fat man, became a pulsing, ropy canopy that rained scalding tentacles upon him. Beck’s arms smoked where it pinioned them. He howled and gibbered in his sanity’s annihilation, while the shoggoth, knowing my will, did not engulf him, but plunged instead its feed tentacles into the back of the fat man’s skull, as one might thrust a spoon into an egg to scoop it hollow. And Bo Beck gaped and stared, and knew, as long as any of the apparatus of knowing remained in him, the shoggoth’s every probe and pluck and hungry violation of his tissues!

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The sun was much declined when I re-crossed the sward amidst my beloved trees. I knew an artist’s pride, for I had shaped a justice with consummate skill. And now, like an omen of further triumph, Natalie came striding toward me over the grass, indignation in every storkish limb. For Natalie, a fool proud of her wits, the justice must involve disclosure. She must be shown the truth, and see it not, that her blindness might be revealed to her when the truth enveloped her.

“Monty,” she opened, crisp and imperious, “there’s got to be a stop to this crap as of right now. I mean it, I mean that gobbledy-gook dialogue. They got it all down pat in perfect good faith, but it just sounds too ridiculous, like someone spitting up or … choking to death. Audiences will laugh! It’ll completely destroy the mood!”

I beamed upon her a sad, avuncular smile and gazed as if with fond and painful remembrance into her eyes. “Natalie,” I said, “I was just going to tend my roses, dear. Would you like to see them? In the light of dusk they have a splendor that no words can describe.”

“Damn it, Monty, don’t play games! What the hell are you talking about? Roses?”

“My dear, it’s not only to view my roses that I ask you along. You see, Roger and I have not been entirely open with you. We have entered into certain arrangements that the rest of you do not suspect. And now, frankly, I am becoming doubtful and even ashamed of my part in the deception.”

I started walking, and she, with a visible tug like a hooked fish, lurched after me. I continued, slowing my utterance with remorseful sighs and pained pauses. “You see my dear … you haven’t always been very friendly to me … you even put considerable … effort into getting your sister to divorce me. But somehow, in spite of this … I can’t help feeling that you’re the only one here with sufficient detachment and insight to hear me out, and to honor my confidence, at least for a reasonable time.”

She was striding beside me now, all attention. “I’m not promising anything in advance, Monty. I’ve got to know more about what’s going on.” We turned round the eastern corner of the house and down a graveled walk flanked by yew and cedar. I walked in silence some moments, my countenance struggling as if to phrase humiliating disclosures.

“You see, my dear, Roger did not conceive this film and has not paid a cent to implement it. He has, rather, *been* paid a quarter of a million dollars to pretend to conceive it, pretend to work on it, and pretend, at length, to hit upon the idea of using Sternbrucke for the location, due to a happy coincidence whereby he learned that I owned such a place. In truth it was I who told him of the property. I came to him with the entire proposition, fully detailed, and with an advance check of a hundred thousand dollars in my pocket. Oh, but wait, my dear, for this is not even the half of it!”

She had stopped, and clenched her fists. “That sonofabitch! His belt-tightening budget! Why, he’s got me working on percentage! You sonofabitch! All this bullshit! All this …”

“My God,” I sighed, “I was afraid of this. I can’t tell you the rest. I can see you’ll go immediately to the others. I had hoped there’d be compassion for the grotesque whimsies of a very lonely old man!” I moved, as if despairingly, onward. She greatly lusted to fly back to the others and deliver

her discoveries with triumphant squawks, but she craved, even more, to have it all before she did so. Before the gap between us had widened too far, she came hurrying after me, grumbling that she promised nothing but had to know more.

As if still racked with shame and reticence, I led her far before I spoke again. We crossed the gardens enclosed by the wings of Sternbrucke and were well down the sloping sward beyond before I continued. At the foot of the slope, whither we tended, was the arboretum, and just beyond that was my beloved rose garden.

"The terrible thing, my dear," I said tremorously, "the shocking thing is that Roger's profit, which he took in such unfair secrecy from the rest of you—but I insisted on it, you see!—the shocking thing is, he will never spend this profit. For Roger is utterly outside of earthly space and time. Yes, Natalie—he has been rapt away by an Entity older than this very globe—and it was an Entity *I summoned*."

Here I went so far as to clutch my temples and hurry ahead, like a distracted man trying to flee his own thoughts, groaning in fitful soliloquy, seeking the merciful shadows of the arboretum. She plunged into the leafy shade after me, catching up with me where I leaned against a fragrant jasperanda tree, weakly shaking my head.

"What is the *matter* with you? Monty! What incredible crap are you talking? Answer me! Where's Roger?"

I turned tear-bright eyes upon her. "Oh, Natalie, Natalie! I have so much to confess to, and it is all so hard for a normal man or woman to grasp! I am a warlock! I am more than two hundred years old, and through that time I have had deep traffic with a race of beings that only the maddest visionaries have even guessed at! And by one of these beings Roger has been taken! Oh, try to believe me, Natalie. Difficult to believe, I know, but I can show you proof. My roses are proof that can be seen and touched."

Perhaps because her powers of comprehension were so painfully overloaded, her temper snapped.

"If you think I'm going to stand still for this unbelievable bullshit, Monty, then you've made a big mistake. You're going to tell me all about it right now or I'm going to have Kamin and Bo shake it out of you."

I drew myself up, my features stiffening to a mask of glacial scorn. I spoke with slow fervor:

“You pitiful fool. And I counted on *your* intelligence. I could put in your hands a bouquet of my roses, my transcosmic Yuggothian roses, all tagged, their extraterrestrial provenance precisely described—I even have a monograph, written in my own hand, upon their nature and substance. I see how grossly I overrated you. You are ignorant, of course, but ignorance is not the mark of stupidity. No, the Dunce’s signal trait is the refusal of knowledge when it is offered, the rejection of plain evidence!”

Natalie had, from our very first meeting years before, misread in my natural reserve a cold, professorial contempt for her mental powers due to the fact that she was a woman. If I had bestirred myself to greater vigor in admiring her pronouncements and “insights” (as she called them) we might have been friends, but as it was, she had cast us from the first as adversaries. I had now struck the perfect note to bring her into accord with my design. While waking her to a fury of self-vindication, I appeared at the same time to be giving into her hands quaint proofs of lunacy with which she could make me the laughingstock of whatever audience she could assemble for them. A grin of fierce irony dawned on her face as I spoke, and when I had done she said, fairly vibrating with happy anger:

“Will you do that, Monty? Will you really give me a bouquet of them, and tag and classify them in your own hand? Well, I say *right on*. I say *lead me to ’em*. Let’s just have that evidence, yeah!”

So we hastened on down the arboretum path, the leaf shadows sliding off our shoulders like a gentle, ghostly rain, while the breeze shook down on us a dry, rainy whisper. We marched to the trees’ farther fringe, where the land falls away to the little valley that Beck and I had lately walked beneath. Just below us, on the crown of the slope, we beheld the acre of roses where they glowed in their wrought-iron palings.

Did I say glowed? I said too little. The *red* of them, lush and varied—it *reverberated* in the golden dusk, it devoured the eye and set the nerves afire. Just so, across light-years of space-time, must alien sunsets blaze in gorgeous, toxic atmospheres. More shameless than whole Babylons of fragrant odalisques, those swollen, carnal blossoms lolled, fattening like vampires on the sun’s saffron and copper.

No one in his senses could fail to feel the Otherness of my garden. Natalie found herself on a threshold where her reality, believed boundless, suddenly terminated. Yet, for all that it stunned her, she ran forward, seizing the lead. For this Strangeness must be attacked. Advance, Natalie! Make it

give way to your own Righter Way! Such roses *must not be* under your own pet earthly sun. Fly down to them, Natalie. Make them flee before you like a flock of geese, and make the world the way you like it once again. She fled through the gates, baroque masterpieces of iron. I shut them after me as I followed her into that rich wilderness of barbs and satin.

She stood slackly, turning with a kind of drunken abruptness to gape at the surrounding host. When I spoke to her I was bland and grandfatherly again. “The generation you see here is of Yuggoth, but the race is provenant from vastly more distant places. I say race, for they are sentient.”

My words seemed not quite to reach her. She spoke in a musing, almosttender key:

“They’re bigger than *cabbages*. They’ve got thorns in their petals.”

Gently, I resumed: “Do you realize, there is not one of them that does not antedate this planet’s Age of Ice by whole millennia? And yet they are the very image of fresh spring.”

Natalie shuddered, a deep, fluid movement, uncharacteristically graceful. “Their *color*,” she said. Her quiet voice began taking on a small, mournful emphasis, a complaining whine. “Their color is … not possible. It’s … it’s *feeling up* my mind. It’s *groping* my brain inside!”

“Yes!” I cried. “How well you put it! They’ve been my guests for more than a century and still I feel it every time as freshly as the first—by the Old and the Elder Ones! Look! Look above! Can it be?”

I could not believe my luck, and in another instant saw that this could not be mere fortuity. Clearly, Great Tsathoggua was pleased with my little dramatics, and in an awesome antic mood had done this to set the seal of masterwork upon my little scenario for Natalie. Straight above us in the sky a flaw appeared in the dusk’s smooth, brazen light. This flaw gaped and windowed out, showing us a little lake of stars studding black space. And out of this rift a tiny shape came sprawling down. A splayed, pallid, broken doll it was that grew smoothly overhead, plunged down in a climactic surge of acceleration, and crashed meatily into the roses.

Their gnarled black stalks flexed limberly, swallowing the shock and hooking the figure in a thousand places, while the smash of impact, by some delicate transmission, crossed the entire garden like breeze on a wheatfield, and the blossoms stirred. There, hung nude in the thorn thicket, was Roger himself, a torn and emptied bag who did not bleed where the thorns caught him, and whose dozen ragged wounds were not even red at

the rims. No painted martyrdom, of even the greatest period, could match the funereal splendor of the tableau that Roger made there, sprawling amid the wakening, shivering flowers. Natalie's voice caught in her throat. Her knees buckled, and she fell to them.

"They're *opening*," she complained, in a whine that was more than even a child's. "They have yellow eyes! They're *eating* him."

She spoke the truth. The petals were dilating slickly, like slowed camera shutters, and my guests' eyes, bulbous gems of glee and greed, were disclosed. Meanwhile, at a dozen places Roger's frost-seared pallor was dissolving pinkly in the ample toothed kisses of the blossoms. I judged it was time to leave the garden. As I turned, Natalie discovered that the flowers everywhere had shaken the loam from their roots and begun a mincing, elegant advance upon her from all sides. Her scream was like a parting gift. I latched the gate behind me and hurried back up to the arboretum, to watch the spectacle from above. It was a gorgeous one, extravagantly musical.

I turned away sooner than I wished and hurried back to the house. The full moon of May Eve would shortly rise, and in its light my dearly beloved must speak her lines.

What a convenience was Valerie's and Kamin's contempt for me! They had me identified as a pitiable old voyeur. I would not dare, would not presume to lie to them. Their world was so charmingly simple, really. The possession of personal beauty was its full scope and purpose. Others made efforts, had plans, and pursued complex goals involving boring details. Valerie and Kamin were *beautiful. Satis est!* Existence required no disfiguring strenuosities from them.

And thus, I was simply believed when I told them that we must hurry upstairs for the shooting—that Bo was coming and Natalie had yielded to necessity but was still off sulking to herself. Valerie made a charming little grimace of revulsion at the repulsive dialogue, and they trooped upstairs. They left behind a mirror-and-razor on the mantle, as well as a chased silver hash case and pipe, recently used. I followed them up, deferentially far behind. I fairly floated in the buoyant certainty of success.

We entered the 'chapel.' Koboldus, now departed on another errand, had just lit all the censers, and all the resin-lamps dispensed their polychrome abundance. The window was already coming to shifty life, its graphic ambiguities more aswirl now, though still the unobservant would see only

the multicolored air of the room at work. The camera, and the mikes on their booms, stood ready.

Valerie sang, "Lights, camera, *sack out!*" and danced with little mock pirouettes up the carpet while she shed her cloak. She always had such fey grace! Kamin shed his boxer's robe and likewise stepped forth in his costume, a gaudy loincloth and no more. There was a horned rune on the loincloth which the uneducated would see as vaguely satanic, and in which the initiate would instantly recognize the Tyndalon, which is the summoning symbol of the Hounds. Similarly, Valerie wore the slender gold fillet that compels Araknadd to crawl down from his place at Azathoth's side and scuttle obediently into earth's space-time. And yet these entities would come as but the attendants upon One far greater than they.

Just then, the moon's sweet, silver cutting edge notched the sky's eastern horizon. They moved to the dais, whereon the window's wheel of light lay, like a pool. The dais was a four-poster altar, cornered with Cthulhuic totem shafts capped in turn by bawdy Priapic finials—a lustful couch more than a shrine. Valerie lay back upon the color-splashed velvet, taking the posture of the splayed sacrifice. Kamin, his movements looking wooden next to hers, knelt beside her.

With the first direct light of the moon, the window had unmistakably vitalized. Some of the Visages in it were fleetingly embodied and then dissolved, and only a kind of unconscious enthrallment could account for the pair's not being at least vaguely alarmed. The first giddy effluxions of the alien sphere can have this effect, and doubtless the pair, from the formless aesthetic excitation of their drugs, found the transition to cosmic rapture a smooth one. It was, in fact, this seizing-up of the spirit that I was counting on to buoy their memory for the difficult lines they had to speak.

Nevertheless, until the moon had ripened to our purpose there was great danger of awakening the lovers' fears, plucking them from their light trance and rupturing the delicious rhythm of this ultimate sacrament. When Bo Beck's flabby and morose bulk shambled into our rainbow gloom and marched (not uncharacteristically reeking of whiskey) to the camera, I looked sharply to them. But already their hectic blood had beguiled the lovers—they nuzzled and nudged in their ensorceled daze and scarcely looked up!

It went so perfectly! They couched there, working up their passions with playful frictions; I looked on as one mesmerized; in the dark behind the

camera, the latest arrival absorbed himself in stiff-fingered adjustments of the apparatus. And the moon—that giant, cosmic coin, new-minted—seemed amicably to thrust its wealth upon the world with greater than wonted swiftness, until at last its lower rim slid free of the far hills. From the camera came some decisive clicking, and the order to begin was grunted. The pair resumed their postures—he kneeling and she sprawled—and lifted their voices.

They were as if transported. Their memories never faltered. And truly, if the words of summoning have made any slightest impression upon a man's memory, then Those Outside, if they are very near, will all but pull them out of his mouth, such is their eagerness to cross and enter. The young lovebirds' performance was truly phenomenal. They struck the intonations with uncanny verve and felicity, as if they were, like myself, grizzled adepts of that crabbed and horrific tongue. Their human throats gasped and clutched with the punishing labor of its barbaric utterance, and in the gruntings that it compelled them to articulate, like Circe's charm, converted them to animals, swine that spoke. Those flawlessly sung syllables horripilated my spine's length. The window began to change spectacularly.

It became a seethe of shapes, a swirling bestiary of savage forms. Just as quickly, the seethe became a boil too swift for anything to coalesce within it. The boiling became a kaleidoscopic blur, a plunging blur, as if we fell into the sky through maelstroms of color. And then we skidded to monstrous, stable focus, and we in that room were like men in a puny glass-bottom skiff who discover a vast-eyed head engrossing acres of the abyss beneath them and find that they float upon the lake of the lens of the eye of a sentience that mocks and leers.

Oh, then they turned on their couch of awe, finding that their bodies could not leave the altar (truly and wholly an altar now!). They glared back at us with bulge-eyed pleas that we should prove it an hallucination, that cephalopod leviathan of boiling arms that pressed its colossal scrutiny upon them through the dizzying wheel of moon-fired glass!

And as they looked beggingly back to us for sanity, for succor and reassurance, I stepped forward and bowed to them. Their throats corded and fingers clawed with the frenzy of their appeal, but the thought-destroying, pan-chromatic shrillings of unearthly flute music swallowed their voices and turned their screams to mute masks. Bo Beck's hulk shambled to my side. It collapsed to the floor like a blubbery overcoat, and Koboldus

stepped out of it, in his true form, his scales and talons shining wet from his disguise. I raised my arms to Him who peered through the glass, and I cried out the Syllables of Consignment, whereby the offering is yielded to the Power:

“Thragg-nun Azathoth! Hyurrnim dhal-lad Azathoth! Nnngyah! Nngyah! Han-gnad, Cthulhu! Han-gnad Yog-Sothoth! Thragg-nun Azathoth!”

Then a very Ragnarok surged through the window, which burst to scintillant atoms before it! The Hounds crowed big-shouldered through the sparkling chaos and joyously sank their bristling snouts into Kamin. Tarantulaic Araknadd vaulted to Valerie’s golden head and pierced it like an orange rind with sleek, hypodermic fangs.

And yet our sacrifices scarce had eyes for these lesser horrors. They lavished all their howlings and, pleading contortions, like tribute gold, upon the giant of boiling arms whose beaked mouthparts had pecked away the window and which now, after one voluptuous pause, pinched those two squalling morsels from the gory, glass-littered velvet!

Adieu! Adieu! O glorious departure! I relive it still each day, and though the seasons have come fully round again, I find the sweetness of the memory still fresh and the image undimmed. And so shall it prove, I think, to the end of my days, for few such triumphs as that May Eve are granted an artist, and he does well to treasure those which are.

THE PRESENTATION

I

Rick was a compassionate guy, a reasonably compassionate guy, so when he sat astride his ten-speed waiting for the light, and the wino stepped over and said, “Can you spare a quarter, sir?” Rick reached in his fanny pack and scooped out his change—seventy or eighty cents—and dropped it into the callused palm and said, “I wish it was more.” He thought that maybe the guy wasn’t exactly a wino after all because the palm had done a lot of work but was clean, and though the man’s sweatshirt and overalls were shabby they were pretty clean too, and the body inside those clothes seemed taut and balanced, and the man’s bony face had a preoccupied, slightly impatient air.

“I can’t use all this,” said the man—almost certainly not a wino, Rick decided. “I need just one quarter. Thanks.” He gave Rick back the rest of the coins and turned and headed for a nearby alley.

The light changed and Rick pedaled on—glanced back and saw the guy come out of the alley on wheels of his own, an old, heavy, gearless bike. The guy held a little rusty red gas-can in one hand as he pedaled. He just made the same light and, pedaling much harder than Rick, overtook him, giving him a brief nod as he passed.

Rick still had panels to ink on the new issue of *Death Groan Comix*, and he’d almost reached the South-of-Market loft that *Death Groan* leased … but he thought he’d encountered a really interesting character. The dramatic bones in his brow and cheeks, the remote, impatient eyes. Look at the guy pump those pedals, the overalls flapping against lean powerful legs! This guy had innate drama. He would draw well. Maybe an inner-city courier, a Mercury of the down-and-out—penniless but strictly proud. The guy was probably trying to start some heap he owned. It would be great to see the car—a battered old smoke-belcher, no doubt, the chariot of an underworld knight-errant. Rick could draw the *car* as a Mercury, get the theme in that way …

The guy turned down Sixth and headed for the Bayside. Rick followed. They passed the City Jail … went under the freeway. When the man pulled

into a gas station and filled his can, Rick stopped well back. He wanted the guy as Image, not a personal connection.

They turned onto Townsend, toward the stadium. Though he had followed people before for their graphic yield, it began feeling strange to dog the man so tenaciously. But the guy's car would be picturesque, Rick was sure of it, would have enough trashy character to inspire his own version—something really original, something junkyard-supernatural.

The guy pedalled down Third, into China Basin. Crossing the massive little black drawbridge, Rick began to feel too conspicuously in pursuit, especially when the guy hooked onto the half-deserted frontage road that ran past shipyards, deserted parking lots, and decaying wooden piers.

Sure enough, though he hadn't seen the man glance behind him, he stopped his bike, straddled it, and turned to look straight back at Rick. Rick couldn't just ridiculously turn and ride back to the loft. Coasting to a stop beside him, Rick blurted, "I'm sorry. You made me curious."

The man nodded thoughtfully. His face's tightness gave him a kind of skinned look, as if he were a taxidermied figure in a museum diorama. He looked so *vivid*. The sun was declining. Oakland, across the Bay, took on a more golden hue. It was the hour Rick loved best, when things got more luminous. But within this rich light, the man faintly glowed with a light of his own. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Rick Tindal."

The man smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Tindalos."

"Tindal."

"I'm Luke Cipher. Here's the way it works, Rick. You have *contributed*, and so you have a right to see. But seeing is a two-edged sword. You can never *un*see what you have seen."

"Of course … but, uh, what would I see?"

"Sorry. I can only show. I can't explain. So I guess the question is, are you a see-er, or a blinker?"

Rick didn't like that note of challenge. It gave him the notion that, all along, Luke had *wanted* him to follow. It happened, though, that Rick particularly prided himself on being a see-er. *I've got something to show you*—it was, of course, the oldest bait in the world …

"I guess you've got me really curious now."

"Come on. We're almost there."

They approached, on the inland side of the frontage road, an old cement factory. Structures of rusty corrugated iron, surmounted by tall hoppers, stood amid thickets of weeds. A spur of railroad track hooked into this property, but the rusty cars looked as defunct as the rest of the place. The sagging chain-link fencing stood gateless. They pedaled inside, through the dust along the track. Luke stopped beside a flatcar coupled at either end to rusted, garishly grafittied boxcars. Dismounting from his bike and laying it in the dust, he gestured at the flatcar and in a grand, ironic tone declaimed, "Behold, See-er!"

There was nothing on the flatcar but, at its center, a shapeless heap of weathered old tarpaulin. Luke set his gas can on the splintered bed, and vaulted up beside it. Stood there, arms akimbo, a suddenly gleeful, sardonic figure. "Our concoction this evening," he declaimed, "is *Esquelette brulée*. First, a liberal besprinklement of premium unleaded."

He uncapped the can. The purplish fluid chugged out onto the mounded tarp, sending up, where it splashed down, a fine violet spray in the golden afternoon light. Now the drenched tarp glittered like a great fresh dropping from the hindquarters of some prehistoric beast. "*Ensuite*," cried antic Luke, an agile, dancing imp in overalls, "*le feu!*" A wooden match appeared in his uplifted hand. A raking thumbnail snapped it alight. He sent the match cartwheeling down onto the reeking heap of canvas, and it whumphed into flame.

Rick stood drinking it in. *Here* was some shit! The graphics of it! This crazy fucker Luke was handing him whole panels of raging good graphics. Once again Rick's instincts for the bizarre were paying off. As he was born to draw, he was born to ferret his way to great images. This was far better than some battered old Chevy or Buick!

At the same time, he might have to think about being careful. Weigh what it might mean to get more deeply involved with a guy like Luke here. Luke had dropped to his knees. Knelt with his arms spread wide, his face skyward, a smiling hallelujah face. Cried, "We seek to sear the dish, not to consume it! But let it burn hotly, hotly! Let the chrysalis cook off it in roiling smoke!"

And the smoke was rich and dense, bulges of velvety blackness surging like rapids straight up to—

What?

Surging up some fifteen feet to *a sharp edge of disappearance*, to vanish perfectly through some seam in the air, leaving this golden bayside sky

untarnished.

Again and again he looked from the truncated column of inky smoke to the clean air just above it. For endless seconds his brain simply refused to put the two plain facts together. Luke was looking at him now, still smiling.

“Whaddya think, Rick? The smoke of the offering goes elsewhere. It rises directly to *His* nostrils, and how *He* savors it! But watch!”

The tarp’s ashy husk crumpled off, and there was … a *body* inside. A crouched skeleton really, for its flesh was all but vaporized already, streaming up so fiercely that the bones seemed to dance.

Did move, in fact! The bowed spine worked, the legs and arms seemed to crawl, though it did not advance. It crouched and swam within the flames, growing blacker, starker as its organic sheath shrank off.

The skull was … not human. A jutting muzzle, a wolfish mandible. The jaws worked, as if feeding on the fire. Luke sprang from the flatcar, down to Rick’s side. “Brace yourself,” he said.

A wind began to blow in off the bay—no sooner began than gusted so mightily it staggered Rick toward the car. Flame and smoke were blown gone all at once. A man stood where the ashes had been.

The man was beautifully dressed. He looked like some guy in *Vogue*: lusciously suited, alligator shoes, his face a handsome vacancy. He jumped down from the flatcar, but seemed not even to see Luke or Rick. He straightened the plump knot of his burgundy tie and began walking west. For a long time they watched him. Unhurriedly, implacably he advanced on the City’s proud-towered skyline.

II

“The sun is down,” mused Luke. It startled Rick. He realized he and Luke were standing side by side, still gazing at the skyline, seeing the first freckles of lights coming on in the skyscrapers. Luke’s hand lay absently on Rick’s left shoulder …

Where had Rick been just now? Where was it he felt he was just coming back from …? Undeniable strangeness came off of Luke like cold off ice. His bony profile, his skin so tautly stretched, seemed a slender sheath for raging energy—for glacier-driving forces, or for flames like he’d just set up on the flatcar. Yet though he stood so close, his hand on Rick’s shoulder,

Rick felt somehow totally cool with it, as if they'd just *been through* something rich and rare together, and everything was settled between them.

But what was it?

"Just look," said Luke, turning him to face the Bay, "at this fine, round world! How it crawls with life!"

And the Bay was indeed the glorious sight it always was. Above its wide eastern rim, house-crusted hills spanned left and right past sight. Great container ships crept past the islands, and atop the mighty bridges that arched from shore to shore, whole rivers of steel-boxed humanity inched rumbling and fuming along.

"To *Him*," said Luke—and with what loving, tender awe he said it—"this world is like an immense pie. Into this vast pie, *His* sharp-searching tentacle-tips branch down from above, up from beneath, and everywhence from Time itself, and they find every plum in the pie, and pierce it, and wear it like a finger-puppet, and finally, *feed* on it, and *He* is greatly pleased therewith!"

The words, so utterly insane, somehow nonetheless sent a shiver of answering awe along Rick's spine.

"Listen," he said. Then stood at a loss, blinking at the reddening sky, at the wide waters darkening to indigo. "Listen, Luke. I'm … losing track here. This … *He*. Who *is* it?"

"Rick! Dude! *His* whole pet world here bears *His* name, writ large and small upon its every surface! It's everywhere! It's there!" He swept his arm up at the leftward boxcar. Preeminent amidst its dense grafitti, a slash of white, indecipherably stylized letters.

Wondering at himself, his eye usually so sharp at decoding design, Rick pulled his little sketchpad from his fanny pack, began simplifying each blocky letter, trying to crack their code.

And then he saw it, all at once. It hit his brain like a bestial shout:

CTHULHU YA FHTAGN

Rick was used to seeing the world as a large potential comic book. To see what belonged to the world of the comic book erupt into this one, while it stunned him, stunned him with its symmetry. Its rightness.

At the same time, the rest of him spun like a whirlpool around this axis of revelation, and the rest of him was registering doubt, terror … panic.

A calming weight upon his shoulder. Luke's hand again.

"Rick." A gentle merriment was in his face. "You need to understand. This is simply happening, your contribution is … so *minor*. Our friend Chet Shugrue, whom you just helped me liberate, he's doing all the heavy lifting. He'll put it all in motion. Meanwhile, nothing's asked of *you* except what you'd do willingly, on your own, if you were ignorant of all this."

This—it was as much Luke's aura as his words—calmed Rick a little, though it left him dazed. "Chet who?"

"Chet Shugrue."

"Luke … you say this is simply happening. What is happening?"

"What is *always* happening? A body of greater mass, that can bend light and time, draws *in* all lesser masses, and adds their slightness to its ageless bulk! To see this happen close at hand—why, it's a see-er's dream. You should rejoice, because, nothing you do can change a jot of it."

"And so," he ventured, "I will see more … of this?"

"Oh yes! Just go back to your business! Do what you will! Do what you would! You'll take the needed turnings as they come."

In the growing dark, Rick pedaled back along the empty frontage road. The decaying piers—some little more than thickets of plankless pilings—seemed like the bones of some earlier civilization upon which this one stood. A whole previous world annihilated by some Greater Mass that reached down for its life and ate it whole.

III

The following night, Rick was rough-sketching panels—had four whole sheets drawn already. It was a struggle to stay in the sketch mode; he kept slipping into details, like that boxcar's grafitti, but it was always most effective to block out the whole spread first, establish the narrative …

Rat—as Irving had recently insisted he be called—was working on his own board. The big loft was full of gloom, and their two stations were isolated cones of light, the scratching of their pens and the rustle of their sheets the only sound.

"Sounds like you've got something hot," said Rat, his eyes not leaving his own work.

"You sound hot at it too," evaded Rick, himself still sketching.

“Yeah. I met an interesting guy today. He gave me some ideas.”

Rick stopped sketching. “Who was he?”

“A total Suit, but remarkable.”

“A Suit. So what were you talking about?”

“*We* weren’t talking—him and *Mark* were. But the guy, Chet something, had, like, *vision*. He gave me some great ideas. Mark didn’t hear a word of it, of course. He was just listening to the money part.”

Rat was still bent over his panels, scratching away, but Rick could see that he wanted to be coaxed for the details, that he wanted to spill it all. And Rick wanted to hear it. Could this be the same Chet? He stared at Rat with a sense of seeing himself from the outside. Another comix artist, drawn into this strange eruption of the impossible through the fabric of the possible.

The man who had stood up, an Armani vision, from a cone of crumbling ash atop a flatcar, talking to *Mark.* Mark was Rat’s stepdad. He owned this and seven other buildings in the artistically hot South-of-Market, but these real-estate assets, weighing in at seventy mil, were a mere detail in Mark’s fiscal landscape. He was farming graphics talent in all these lofts and remodeled warehouses. Three of them housed the computerized smithies where video games were forged, two of them already crafting, respectively, *Acute Angle II* and *Nano-Barbarians III*, while their labels currently enjoyed between them almost thirty percent of the market share. Good old Mark, as Rat always sourly called him, had boardroom links with AOL and Time Warner. Rat—Irving then—was stepfathered by Mark at the incendiary age of fifteen, and one of corporate America’s eternal adversaries was born from that conjunction, despite Mark’s continuing effort to instruct and induct his stepson into Business. Rat was now and forever an Artist.

“So what was the money part? What was Chet talking to Mark about?”

Rat turned from his work with gusto. “You had to see him, Rick. A walking one-man big-buck Presentation! Good old Mark, sitting there all sober and judicious, was *drooling* almost visibly within three minutes. The guy looked like Mr. GQ, but he talked like … like Shakespeare! Like Martin Luther King! I *know* good old Mark didn’t understand half of it, but he was lifted just by the guy’s charisma. He said some amazing shit! Said people talk about parallel universes, but the reality is infinite *concentric* universes. So that into any one of them, the contents of the contiguous one can erupt through the membranes of time and space, can erupt *within* that world’s inhabitants, and wear its fabric as the hand wears the glove!”

“Whoa. Is that a direct quote?”

“You know, I think it is! His words just … stayed with me!”

“So … talking like that … what was this guy *selling* to old Mark?”

“Meta-Cinema. The New Dimension of theater-audience immersion. Light-years beyond IMAX.”

Rick chewed on this. “I … guess I don’t see the connection.”

“What connection?”

“Between this Meta-Cinema and the concentric universes.”

“Oh! You know … it’s funny, I don’t *remember* the connection. The guy said so much in like what—less than ten minutes.”

“So Mark, like, got onboard that fast?”

“I’m telling you. This guy was a pitch-meister. Turns out his principals are renovating the old Grand Theater for a Presentation of this new experience, and afterwards the theater’s gonna be like a ten-million-dollar gift to the people of San Francisco. The whole renovation will be done in two weeks. Perfect status-leverage built into the pitch. The Presentation is a black-tie special-invitation affair limited to ‘first-rank corporate media investors.’ And get this—this is the perfect, balls-out touch of showmanship: these black-ties are required to bring their laptops, and be empowered to transfer funds electronically in their very seats after the lights go up! That’s what’s going to bring the big *machers*. The impudence, the insult of that condition. Come ready to buy, or stay home, because you’re going to buy.”

“Renovating the Grand is good publicity too. Half the City drives by it every day. When do they start?”

“You kidding? All the scaffolding’s already up. I passed it coming in. The pedestrian walkways all built—there was a night crew already working inside.”

Rick had a sense of the whole loft shifting, very gently, around him, the sensation that the world was a step ahead of him. Revelation was already on the move. It was approaching.

“So what’s—” he had to clear his throat. “So what’s the new technology? What’s he got?”

“Who knows? Wild words! ‘A whole dimension beyond holographics.’ Your guess is as good as mine.”

Who knew and who cared? Rat was already back at work on his panels, and Rick was again strongly drawn to his own. That was all they wanted really, wasn’t it? Something good, something rich and strange on the board

… He scanned his work lovingly. Here, for instance. He'd given Luke a car after all, had it slouched in the dust by a boxcar—an old big-boat convertible, satanic fins, chrome-browed headlights like jet-streamed demon's eyes. It struck him that while he often thought Rat's work was good but marred by a stridency, an angry exaggeration, didn't his own work bulge with anger too, with an implacable opposition to Normality?

Well, they were brothers in art, doing what they did best. That was all that mattered here and now, and he got back to it.

IV

Two nights later, Rick had half the panels ready for inking. He'd always smiled at people saying things like, "It drew itself," because if it did he figured it wasn't likely to be very good. But these panels drew themselves! And they were great. And, another new thing for him, he'd drawn the incident straight, from life.

There were alterations, embellishments. The car now had tire-treads patterned like the paw-pads of beasts. Its upholstery was the stretched skins animals and its steering wheel was a circle of welded bones. And slashed across its hood was a stark white grafitto. *HE COMES*.

And in the last panel he'd already decided on another fantastic augmentation. Luke, pedaling away from the smoking flatcar, would have, within his overalls, the lean-thewed and back-jointed limbs of some monstrous hound, while his face, still his own, was lifted in a profiled smile of exultation.

The distant clatter of the door. Rat hustling in, and calling across the high-ceilinged gloom as he came, "Rick! We gotta comission off it! That Meta Cinema presentation!"

"How much?"

Rat didn't answer, saving his punchlines for a dramatic close-up in the cone of Rick's worklight. He looked transported. He pulled a scrolled poster from under his arm and unrolled it. It was blank, except for blocked out letters across the top.

COME CTHULHUBRATE
THE MURAL MASS
ADD YOUR SPRAYCAN CHALK PAINT FELT-TIP ART
TO THE *PORTAL BENEATH*

“We draw up a couple of pictures. Print off five hundred of each. We hire some help to put em up all over the Haight, the ‘Loin, the Mission, South of Market … wherever street people and street artists abound.”

“How much?”

“How much, the man asks! Ricky my brother! Are you ready? Forty K! We cut Jackie and Zed in—we draw, they color. Ten each!”

“Who—”

“Mr. GQ! He called me! Chet Shoggua or something.”

“Shugrue?”

“Maybe. I didn’t really catch it on the phone, and I can’t read his signature here.” And with a sly smile he pulled out a check. “A twenty K advance. He messengered it over this afternoon.”

Rick sat there, his mouth slightly ajar. He felt paralyzed—not because of the check—but because he felt full of so many questions, and he couldn’t determine what those questions *were*. All he had was a powerful sense that questions should be asked. He groped and found the simplest one. “So what do we draw?”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? Something from the Mythos. Something HPL. But what he said was it could be anything that came to mind. His words. Our take entirely, he said.”

“So … what does the Mythos have to do with Meta Cinema?”

Rat beamed. “It absolutely beats the shit outta me! But who cares? We can have fun!”

“Well …” said Rick, something dawning on him. “I think I’ve already got my drawing done. How about this?” And he showed Rat the panel with the grafittied boxcar, CTHULHU slashed across the lesser writing. Beside it in the same image, smoke rose from the flatcar and ended at a seam in the sky.

“Whoa! Dude! That’s so evocative! It’s perfect. It’s oblique and tantalizing. And it totally fits into this whole Mass idea, all the street artists and grafittists contributing to the same mural.”

“So what *about* the Mural. What’s it of?”

“Didn’t you read your own poster? It’s of a Portal, man! A Portal Beneath. Turns out the Grand Theater has this huge basement. They’re already resufacing its walls and floor, are making a mural space as big as a freeway billboard—we’re talkin’ lots of image room.”

“Do I sense, just possibly, a further commission?” Rick meant this to be humorously conspiratorial, but it came out sounding just a little scared.

“Don’t think I haven’t thought of that. If these posters really rock, I’m gonna pitch him. *Oooh!* I just got an idea for mine. Like a flash on the *Mountains of Madness!* You gonna be working here a while?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Gimme an hour or so.”

Rick did panels. Here was Chet Shugrue emerging from the flames. Here was that splendid figure advancing on the City skyline. As he worked Rick had a giddy, wonderful sensation, like a tile-setter who, square by squre, was paving over a road that arched up into the empty air; each image he laid down seemed to overlie a gulf, a darkness within which immense things echoed.

In no time at all, it seemed, Rat was at his elbow with his sketch. Rat was a rigorous draughtsman, severe, but at the same time he was able to kindle an image, to haunt it. Here was a huge underchamber of dressed stone, hexagonal, a massy arched doorway in every facet, all opening upon a millennial rubbled emptiness between them. Five of the doorways were vacant. From one of them, an immense searching tentacle extruded.

“It rocks, Rat-man, it rocks.”

“I’m gonna call the girls. We could be puttin’ these things up all over town by tomorrow night.”

V

Zed was small and angular. When you ran something by Zed, her body language seemed to angle into it, her black-lidded eyes and purple lips adding accent-angles of both skepticism and glee.

“Cthulhu’s really back, you know. Wall art everywhere crawls with his minions.” A spraycan commando capable of Carrivagian compositions, Zed also wrote half the stories *Death Groan* printed.

Jackie had sharp green eyes and a delicately hawkish nose, like a young falcon—was feeding now on the two drawings Rick and Rat produced. Feeding and looking very amused. That meant Jackie was also in. “They’re gonna love this. All of ’em. They’re gonna get into it big time—so what *about* this mural? A portal? Are there guidelines? A period? Parameters?”

“Yes,” said Rat decisively. “There *are* parameters. It’s all fresh buffed concrete. This huge goddamn wall sixteen feet high, and half the floor in front of it.”

“So the drawing space is going to have a big ninety-degreee fold across the middle of it.”

“Correct. So one parameter is the canvas. We are, simply, to fill that canvas with the Portal.”

A pause. Jackie cocked an eyebrow. “Any, uh, further parameters?”

“I’m not sure you’d call it a parameter. *Draw what you will*.”

Rick, inexplicably to himself, shuddered. “GQ’s very words?”

“Slick Chet Shoggua’s very words.”

“Chet Shugrue,” Rick corrected hollowly. *Draw what you will*. He realized he had shuddered because the thought excited him.

Just before dark they piled into Zed’s ancient Beemer, an anti-status symbol, all rust, and rocketed up to the Haight, the sky all indigo with stars coming out, a night wind scouring the fog off the City’s magnificently architected peninsula.

They worked in pairs. Even as they put them up, street folk gathered to the posters. As Jackie pressed one to a pole and Rick plied the staple-gun, he felt a touch at his elbow. A bearded face, hesitantly smiling, its unfurred surfaces all tarnish, the skin a kind of dust-tanned leather, asked, “Is chalks OK?”

“You bet!” smiled Jackie. “Look, says chalk right here.”

But the beardman, though he looked at the poster, seemed to have eyes only for its image—this one of Rick’s, the gloriously grafittied boxcar.

“And the mural,” he said, looking shrewdly at Jackie—“it’s a big open door, right?”

“A big open door,” she nodded.

Maybe it was the gusts of wind, but everywhere they went the streets seemed to hustle with excitement. Even the real people, those on their way to restaurants, with credit cards and digital remote carkeys in their pockets, seemed to frisk as they walked. Indeed, when a clear starry sky is laid over the grandeur of Frisco, who is not uplifted as he walks?

But the unreal people, the ragged gypsies of street art, were all astir. Not all the street people. Many were burnouts, or kids just strutting the role for a while, and these were like the real people, a little excited without knowing it.

But the sly ones, the guerrillas—some kind of word had gone out among these. Perhaps it was because they had slept in doorways that the word of an Open Door spread like wildfire among them. Never had Rick, as he stapled up his and his friends' work, felt so directly the pleasure of an audience for it. Here were his spiritual brothers and sisters, rising up from the shadows, drinking it in.

Art—truth—*was* power. He'd leaned on that all his life, but so rarely *felt* it as he felt it now. The open doorway was this sky itself, its stars, its infinitude revealed. They, he, and his street colleagues were the only ones in the City hooked into the Truth right now. And they were about to open the door to *Him*.

VI

How had this even happened? This gathering of thirty-odd people, and many of them truly odd, in the *Death Groan Comix* loft? To have gotten the majority of the City's freelance muralists in the same place at the same time was a minor miracle.

Further marvels were to come, however. Rat stood in the midst of their disorderly enclave of folding chairs, stood there clearing his throat, the group beginning to quiet down to hear him, when a bony tattooed arm went up.

"Excuse me? Could I offer just a word?"

"Well … sure."

The guy stood up, a tall, bearded, elegant rack of bones in a sleeveless T-shirt. "We're talking Mythos, so it should be a portal of Cyclopean stonework. And it should be circular, a colossal stone sinus. If we just agreed on that at the start, we could get right to work. Have time to make it really *bitchin*'."

The almost perfect silence that greeted this was like a revelation to the whole room. Did *accord* actually exist among them already?

“Well …” said stunned Rat. “Well, whatever we decide, we’ve first got a lot of organizing to—”

“Forgive me. Excuse me. That’s the real point I want to offer. If we’re agreed on only that much of the image, then we should just spread out, and start doing it. We have to be spontaneous. Of course we stay linked up to each other, adapt to our neighbors’ work as we go along. A coherence will *emerge* if we’re together in spirit, but if we don’t take the chance of doing it that way, the whole thing’ll choke up. I mean, this is sorcery, right?”

Again the silence was complete. The roomful of mavericks knew perfect unanimity, and sat amazed by the realization.

After a moment, someone else said, not even bothering to stand up, “And for the street artists, the only rule will be, that they have to wait till we’ve finished a section before they draw on it.”

After a pause, Rat said, “Well. All in favor, say ‘aye.’”

It was a soft roar, a burst of Gregorian plainsong. “*AYE*.”

“Well, OK, then. Just one organizational detail, I suppose. If you’re gonna use scaffold, it has to be small and mobile. Bring that, and your own ladders if you favor them, to the construction entry off Third, or the Grand will provide you with any kind of ladder you want. Also construction lamps. So, how about seven A.M., before the traffic?”

“Hell with that,” someone said. “I wanna start now.”

Me toos rose from half the room.

VII

Zed and Jackie were breaking to stand back from their work. As they gazed at it, Zed glanced at her watch—a Rolex, another sardonically exhibited status bauble—and murmured, “Seventy-two hours.” Meaning since that so-brief organizational meeting in the loft.

It was amazing, this murmurous, intent swarm they were part of, filling this vast basement. And the Image was already more than half painted …

The portal’s vertical arch spanned the whole wall, and many artists had left their ladders and rolling platforms standing and were on their knees, bringing the horizontal arc out across the floor. Meanwhile the street-artists had occupied the abandoned ladders and were encrusting the Cyclopaean

stonework of the arch with gnostic haikus of exploding letters, with images spiky or spiraling or spidery or intricately faceted, with whole little cityscapes in chalk like barnacles on the basalt ashlar of the arch, with mythic micro-figures dancing in delirious bacchanal along the moss-furred mortar lines of the antediluvian stone.

The vertical arch contained a great semicircle of darkness. They'd really gotten a sense of space into that darkness—it seemed an inward-yawning hemisphere as big as night. So many blacks, with sulphur and indigo and royal purple shot through them—so many different blacknesses had pieced together that painted darkness within the arch …

"How did we *do* it?" Jackie asked in simple awe—both of them gazing at that blackness now for the thousandth time. And already, working amidst the legs of the ladders on which the grafittists zestfully toiled, artists were extending that same uncanny darkness out onto the floor they stood on.

"And just look," enthused Zed, "how the stonework flows. Look what it *does*."

The arc of masonry seemed to ripple with millennia of human endeavor. Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Honduran, Incan—the stonework idiom of all these echoed from it, one style seamlessly segued into the next. With this latent flux in it, the portal seemed to breathe, seemed only by a strenuously sustained grip to contain the immensity of the darkness within it.

"You know what," said Jackie. It wasn't a question. "We're really stepping into some deep shit here."

Zed blinked her blackened eyelids and did her Stan Laurel imitation.

"That's *right*, Ollie!"

Jackie slanted a look at her friend and then ventured, "You felt it too, didn't you?"

From Zed, perplexity—a beat too much. "Felt what?"

Jackie nodded. "So you felt it too."

"… Yeah. Especially on the Dark, but also on the stonework too. As if I was carving it."

Jackie nodded. Had felt her brush feeding pigments into a deeper surface than the polished cement. Had felt her brush cutting her work in stone. "Did you feel a … cold," she asked, "coming up through the handle of your brush?"

"Yeah."

Jackie had to grope for her next thought. “Well … it is cold out there. It’s the truth.”

“Amen, Sister.”

And still, filling them both except for this cold core of understanding, there was the happiness of this whole productive spectacle. Humanity’s sweet congeniality when immersed in a clear, shared task. A semi-prosperous muralist with his own mobile scaffoldette conferred enthusiastically with the ragged grafittist sharing his perch. Slick young Art Babes talked up a storm with multi-sweatered chalk-guerrillas wearing fingerless wool gloves. (And there *was* that chill in their subterranean studio. It seemed to leak in from the darkness they’d painted and framed …)

But the two women savored it. That social murmur that filled this space, how sweet it was! Here was that mythic thing people were always talking about, that fabled Sense of Community …

VIII

Rick and Rat sat at a table in Winchell’s. The girls were at the counter getting the coffee and donuts—their treat, since the four of them just this afternoon had banked 20K apiece from the poster and mural commissions.

Rat picked up a discarded *Chronicle* front section from an adjacent table. Gave it to Rick, indicating an article with a smallish headline below the fold. “I noticed this earlier. You see it?”

There’d been a strange spike in Missing Persons the last two weeks. Not runaway kids or the rootless underclass—no news there—but all mature adults of the upper executive class. Three guys from banks, a couple from big brokers, one man and one woman from two major ad agencies, several women in publishing …

“Spooky,” said Rick, gauging his friend’s eyes, trying to see how much he wanted to put on the table between them.

“Let’s not dance around,” said Rat, offering the paper to Jackie as Zed set the tray down. Taking their seats, the women traded a look. “We know,” Jackie said.

“So why dance around? It’s connected, obviously.”

“One of those jellies is for *me*,” Jackie said firmly.

So they ate, watching the early evening traffic outside, debating Rat's claim by not saying anything about it for a while.

Zed burped softly, gulped coffee, and sighed. "Are we really surprised? What did we suppose we were doing?"

Rick realized, as her question echoed between them, that he'd been waiting for this moment. He'd seen more than they had and was tired of being alone with it. "Lemme tell you guys what happened to me. Two weeks ago, I think I saw the beginning of this whole … project."

He told them about Luke, the quarter, the gas can, the flatcar, Chet … In the middle of the account, Rat's cellphone chirred. They all sat silent while he said "yes" twice, described their present location, clicked off looking mildly perplexed, and then waved Rick on with his story.

When it was done, the street outside looked more sparsely trafficked. Their eyes lingered on passersby, staggery or limping folk who seemed to slant them looks of fear, or sinister speculation …

"Just when your income starts getting good," muttered Jackie, "that's when you have to really look at who's signing your checks."

"But we *knew*, didn't we?" protested Rat.

A modest black limo, looking much classier than any stretch, slid to the curb. The chauffeur, suited and capped, with massive shoulders and an almost wofish mid-body leaness, emerged, but the passenger erupted impatiently before he reached the door.

It was Mark, Rat's stepdad. A thick guy in power casual, nice sportscoat, no tie, his balding crown flanked by styled backsweeps of vigorous badger-gray hair. He bustled into the shop.

"Hi, folks. Can I sit?" He was a nice, gruffly friendly guy. His aura of wealth, the moment he entered, made the whole Winchells look three sizes smaller and four shades dingier.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this"—he smilingly declined Rick's offer of a hit of his coffee as he took a chair—"but this is in the nature of an urgent matter. Close-out for the art staff in the basement is in two hours, but I've been informed that the mural isn't finished till it's *signed*. We have to finalize the contract with the Signatory at once. And the Signatory would be you, Rick." He laid a check before him.

"Me?" The check was for four hundred thousand dollars.

"I know, believe me," said Mark, displaying sympathy. "Talking to my son here, I've come to understand the artist's perspective. You all worked

together, and one signature would seem, ah, *egotistic*. But Mr. Shugrue is very specific about it."

Rick picked up the check and held it up in front of each of his three friends. He couldn't quite decide how he felt about what he was going to do. He had a sense that there might be something wrong with it, but he couldn't see what it was. He asked Mark, "Can you write four checks right now? Dividing it equally between us?"

"Well, as long as *you* sign it, I don't see why not." For a beat there, Marty's surprise was nakedly visible. Taking out his checkbook and beginning to suit his actions to his words, he recovered some of his poise, talking as he wrote. "And I have to tell you how I admire this, Rick. This artistic spirit, this *ethic*. This kind of sharing is so refreshing. My son has helped me to really understand it."

"You just refuse to call me Rat, don't you?" said his stepson. He was smiling tolerantly enough, receiving his own check as Mark tore it off and handed it over.

"Son, we come from different … cultures. We just have to learn to give and take a little. And while we're on the subject, I hope you all don't think"—here came Zed's check, torn off and handed over—"that this *limousine* idea is *my* style. I would've driven myself! But Chet said his Principal insists on an entire … protocol." *Rip. Flutter*. Here came Jackie's check. She plucked it from his fingers.

"I'll back you there, Mark," smiled Rat. "The limo's not you. Your slick little Jag's your style. That limo's too gothic—especially with that *driver*."

"That driver …" echoed Mark. His mind seemed elsewhere for a moment, and just detectably, he shuddered.

"Mark?" Rat prompted gently.

"Oh. Yes. And here's yours, Rick. No contract necessary. Just endorsing that constitutes acceptance."

The chauffeur was ready for his passenger when Mark returned to the limo—stood with a deferent stoop, door held wide for him. The four at the table saw, under the shadow of the driver's cap, the glint of his eye as it followed Mark into the back seat.

They sat watching them drive off. Then it dawned on Rick, what was wrong with his generosity. Responsibility had been conferred on him, and he'd instantly paid his friends to share it with him. All four of them looked at their checks.

“So, Jackie,” Rick ventured. “About what you were saying? We know who’s writing these checks, don’t we?”

They looked at each other then. “So are we evil minions?” Rat asked. “Is that what this makes us?”

“First and foremost, we’re people who draw the truth.” This from Zed. “We don’t make it, we show it. And if the truth … emerges from our work …”

“… it’s not our fault,” finished Jackie.

There was a long silence. Rick was not the one who could break it—that had to come from one of his friends.

It was Jackie. “The real question here is, are we fulla shit or not? Do we mean it or not? So, I guess we better get back,” she said. “Showtime’s eleven.”

IX

They arrived at the basement expecting to find Close-out in progress, but there wasn’t a ladder or scaffold or chalk-stick in sight, and all the artists were standing on the unpainted half of the floor. A soft surf of conversation rose from them as they viewed their work.

The power of that painted image overcame the folded plane it occupied. It seemed one living mouth of stone, hinged jaws that opened on a seamless, lightless gulf.

Perfecting its power was all the cryptic embroidery of street-art that rimmed it, like the Testament of later ages cunningly scrawled across the stony palimpsest of old basalt. Rich in form and color as tidepool life, these incantations crusted those lips of stone and made the lips seem to speak an intricate litany of spells …

Rick wondered how long the four of them had stood there, because someone was saying, “It’s almost time,” and holding out to him a piece of scarlet chalk. It was the bony man who had risen that night at the meeting, to put them all directly on their path.

Rick took the chalk, stepped to the rim of the Portal, and knelt. Heard the man behind address them all. “When it’s signed, just follow me up to the balcony section. We should take our seats the minute he signs.”

Rick signed one of the painted stones, trying for some flourish. Rubicons should be crossed with flair and style. When he lifted the chalk from the upsweep of the tail of the ‘l’ of ‘Tindal,’ it became very much colder in the basement. He looked into the field of darkness within the painted stones and almost fell in, dizzied by the absolute gulf whose breath bathed his face.

Hands grabbed his shoulders, pulled him back. He was brought to his feet and turned. The whole crowd of artists was cohering into a promptly moving column behind the bony man.

They flowed behind him out of the basement … up the stairs …

X

It was a high balcony—almost opera-house high. The artists drank in the scene below.

The theater, while richly appointed, was somewhat surprising, was somewhat *antique* for the technology expected here. The seats—practically armchairs—were upholstered in burgundy velvet, but they formed a conventional, gently banked array, as in a movie theater. And they faced a *stage*, of gorgeous blond oak, but a stage, backed by high, closed red curtains.

The well-dressed potentates, or potentates’ viceroys, who were already filtering to their seats below registered the quaintness of this venue. They exchanged smiles and words of urbane perplexity, displaying their expectation of something far more futuristic, but sharing too the thought that perhaps some touch of retro humor was intended.

But seats were quickly filled, the people settled, laptops appearing here and there. This audience, though its air was easy, was eager. This audience was *drawn*.

The brushed-chrome sconces on the lusciously fauxed walls (a delirious mix of tan and silver that seemed to dissolve the real world outside as if in a gentle sandstorm) dimmed. But, though darkness settled, the seats had little lap-lights in their arms, and, winking on, these made a dim starfield of the darkened seats. And now the lit stage dominated the theater …

Like a dwarf emerging from the titanic red curtains, Chet Shugrue walked out to stage-center.

The man was *made*, and dressed, for center stage. He instantly commanded all attention. He didn't speak, but with a meaning smile he spread his arms out wide at them. The audience instantly understood. The gesture said: *Look at you! The richest and best, together here! What more could be said?* He displayed them to themselves, inviting their self-celebration, reminding them of their power, and thus of his *own*, in gathering them all here. A murmur of appreciation rose from the crowd.

"You have decided to come," he said. His voice was easy-intimate, and yet it filled the hall. "You've decided to come on the chance that this just might *be* an epochal moment. You were right. It is. You *will* be buying stock, right where you sit, and pretty soon—that's all I'll say. Why should I waste time on promo, with a product like you're going to experience?

"But. There's always a 'but' attached to a fortune, isn't there? But. Before we *embark*, I must speak for my Principal. I must tell you what he … *asks* me to tell you. He bids me tell you that before this presentation's done, you will *know* him. Will know him so completely, there will be no room for even the slightest doubt of his greatness in your minds. And I am to ask you, before we embark, if there are any of you who object to this stipulation."

Now this was surprising. You could see the lap-lit audience looking at one another in the gloom. Several moments went by, and Chet's silence became as fascinating as his voice had been. The crowd studied him, intrigued by the cryptic proposition he had just produced. But no one of them could find anything to say.

"Well," smiled Chet. "*Qui tacuit consentit*. Why delay then?" He turned his back on them and walked to the curtains behind him. Stepped through and faced them again, only his head now visible. "My friends, behold!"

Then he vanished, and so did the theater. Except for the lighted empty stage, the theater had disappeared. The audience, with their dim-lit laps and their black ties, sat amidst the galaxies. Sat in deep space, their banked seating like a fragmentary raft that sailed the spherical infinitude of space and stars. Sitting there with nothing but time and space between their bodies and the galactic clockwork, the audience knew—without dying of it—the absolute grip of Absolute Zero. On their shadowy raft, with the lit stage for a kind of prow, they sailed immensity together. They gazed upon—above and to all sides of them—the tilting discs of stars, and saw the wisps of finer stars their slow spin trailed, like outflung gauzy scarves …

Some of them emerged from their awe before others. From somewhere on that interstellar raft, the faint, feverish clack of a keyboard arose. Several more instantly awoke … and then it became a soft roar, a gentle plastic downpour amid the perfect silence of the fleeing galaxies On that little raft of floating theater seats, thousands of millions of dollars changed … hands.

From every laptop these dollars, these valuable objects, flowed into one Account in one of the banks of one of the cities of one of the continents of one of the planets of one of the trillion trillion stars exploding in perfect silence all around them.

To the audience of this audience, the artists up in their high balcony, while their breath was collectively taken by this grandeur, the revelation of it wasn't as surprising, and the awe it bred was already part of their minds and hearts. Among this hyper-audience, a ripple of knowledge moved. They all knew that this Account was a Dark Name, a syllabic cipher, an echoic whisper within the catacombs of San Fransico finance. It was a capacious Account. They knew it had room and to spare for that torrent of wealth.

For the financiers, this was the longed-for efflux. You could see the stir of them feeling it on their shadowy raft. These gathered potentates had come to be squeezed, had come wanting to be squeezed because money shrinks when it's not poured into the whirlpool of newborn money. They'd come to be squeezed to be augmented. And having just poured out their candidacy for membership in this mighty river of wealth at whose banks they'd been gathered, they sent up a soft sigh of unanimous relief.

Now they would flow with this stream and, allied with its might, carve out whole new landscapes from the earth, whole new domains and ownerships. And this was the *universe* they'd acquired, not just the *world*. They'd all just hit the Mother Lode.

Many of them knew in that moment Gawain's vision when he beheld the Grail. This was the Cosmic G-Spot: the conjunction of a timely investment with a global revolution. Rockefeller with Oil. Gates with Software. This, but *precisely*, was one of those.

And thus every investor in those seats knew as well that egoless humility all humans feel when they stand contemplating the colossal architecture of Time and Space. The last of the clacking had ended. They all sat resonating with the act of allegiance they had just performed.

And that was when, as one, they *felt* the sudden presence of the Entrepreneur, the Holder of this Account into whose bottomless wealth

they'd just disgorged their holdings. The Holder of the Account *hung just below them in the black gulf*.

They felt him as an immense subjacent gravitational mass. They felt the tug of a leviathan hanging just under the keel of their collective consciousness.

And his sudden presence gave them all a wonderful moment of childhood. It was that Daddy feeling—that the grand, glorious, but frighteningly vast muchness and suchness of the world was *mediated* for your little self. That Daddy's greater, loving mass hovered *between* you and the immensity, a loving canopy of concern, a big ally in the bigness of it all.

And feeling this vast Daddy beneath them, they really felt their true dimensions for the first time, really *saw* the galaxies then. Look at them! Each galaxy a titanic white pool of Time. It would take whole planetary lifetimes to cross the white velvet, the frost-spuming whirlpool, of even the smallest disk, tilted like a little white cog fleeing some factory explosion, way out there amidst a cluster of similar little outflung cogs, that whole little cluster whole *stellar* lifetimes distant from themselves …

It made them rejoice for this big, *knowing* nearness, this planetary bulk invisibly beneath them.

But this was strange … their raft of seats had just … shuddered. Hadn't it?

And then the raft *rocked*. The curtains, three stories high, convulsed and vanished. The Portal's annulus of stone replaced them, its throat a second gulf within the universal abyss. A huge mass erupted from the Portal and settled, the stage exploding to splinters beneath it.

It was the *beak* of an immense cephalopod. The valve of flesh that ringed this beak was a horror in itself—green-gray, elephantine folds of skin. Beneath its millennial encrustations of barnacle and moss and oceanic weed, the flesh itself was that stern integument of supple stone that clothed the first gigantic things that lived, after the blown stars cohered, and let life be.

But the beak! This crescent megalith gaped wide. The arcs of its cutting edges were eroded, flaked, and splintered, the damage mossy, eons old, testifying titanic prey dismembered when Life was young. Glaciers had crossed these bony mouthparts and melted away. Populations had perished within them.

Gaped wide, and a gust welled out of it—as pure and razor-cold as space, but laced with ancient carnage of a thousand races. And after this whelm of giant's breath, tentacles erupted—brute cables of sinew as they disgorged,

but swiftly branching, slimming, as they leapt like damburst down into the audience, so that they hit the financiers in a spray of greenish filaments.

Rapt, the artists watched the worming weave flood the seats below and pierce the body of each potentate. Their flesh glowed with these penetrations, their hands and necks, their startled faces all nimbused by a faint, unearthly green.

The beak stirred, and a convulsion rippled down its multibrachiate tongue. An utterance it seemed, a soundless syllable of command.

The audience received it, and, without rising from their seats, they erupted. Their arms shot up as if in acclamation, their faces strained, necks cracking, toward the stars. Their very bones grew within them, their flesh swelled and twisted, brutal muscles hinged their gaping jaws. Then all their eyes blew out.

The exploded tissue, like little pale novas, swelled thinning from their orbits, drifting up into space as new eyes flashed beneath their deep-shelved brows: slash-pupiled eyes like merciless emeralds. Slender tentacle-tips sprouted sinuously from their mouths.

For a long moment, that snake-field conjured from their throats gently wavered and danced, a reptilian unison, a wordless assent.

And then, within its bony gates, the tentacular efflux shuddered and began to recoil. The tendrils were snatched back down into the audence’s jaws, snatched from the shirtfronts and bodices they had pierced, and reknit as they withdrew into the massive cables that had first erupted.

The beak engulfed these and thundered shut. The mighty concussion shattered the Portal and the abyss it framed as if both were painted glass, and the monstrous mouthparts vanished within the glittering curtain of fragments.

The lights came up. The audience, the theater, the stage were all themselves again, and on the stage stood Chet Shugrue once more. The only trace of strangeness was the audience’s utter silence, their perfectly identical postures of full attention.

“Friends,” Chet smiled, “that’s it. You’ll all be far, far richer soon. We’ll be in touch.”

The investors rose. A companionable, enthusiastic murmur rose from them as they trickled to the aisles, and streamed from the theater.

It was late afternoon a week later. In the loft of *Death Groan Comix* Rat and Rick—separately, of course—were drawing what had happened. Naturally the narratives were tweaked, the characters transformed—both of them mutating reality into art, all that. But in essence they were both drawing what had happened. They avoided seeing one another's work. They would share when each had decided he was *done*, but not till then.

Rick refused to have a phone at his drawing table, so it was Rat's cellphone that chirred. Rick inked away, hearing Rat murmur into the phone, but listen far more …

Rat too went back to work. "That was Zed," he announced. "They did it. Chet's Principal bought MOMA."

"Whoa."

"A couple of skyscrapers too—she wasn't sure which ones."

Their pens scratched through a thoughtful silence. There were so many things that might be said between them … and which they had learned there was no point in saying.

"One thing's sure," Rick offered. "There's some big commissions headed our way."

"You got that right."

THE POOL

The jobsite was beautiful in this early morning sun. Daryl's crew was up in the hills of Marin, working behind an upscale development. The grassy slopes blazed in the slanting light. Great stately oak trees perched here and there on the rolling terrain—a scattered multitude that bestrode the slopes like gnarly titan surfers perched on a golden tsunami.

But down in this pit for a swimming pool, Daryl, carrying fifty years and wielding a forty-pound air-hammer with a dirt chisel, was feeling he'd irrevocably run his life into the ground.

Twelve years ago he'd amicably dissolved his marriage, given Julie the house, the cabin, and the cars, and left his copywriting job, turning to a simpler life of manual labor. He'd enjoyed his no-maintenance life in cheap residence hotels, books, movies, his occasional lovers, his occasional trips. He was a sociable man with a selfish core, who liked the luxury of doing exactly what he wanted, when he wanted. And digging had long satisfied something in him, always an adventure to open the earth, uncover the compacted secrets it concealed.

But today he was a mass of achy muscle and tired nerves. Sweat stung his eyes. The generator growled, the compressor roared, the backhoe grunted and stank, and the jackhammer bucked in his hands, punishing his back and shoulders as he trimmed the surfaces of the pit's wall. Daryl had not been entirely heedless. His lifestyle let him save half his yearly income, and he had enough for a major down on some two- or three-acre fixer-upper in West Marin. But to pay off his mortgage, to secure his old age … could he make it through ten more years of *this?*

This morning's pace was relentless. The concrete crew was already here, waiting to swarm down into the hole and drape it with lumber and rebar. The dirt crew was supposed to be done yesterday—thanks to the general contractor's overzealous schedule. There, indeed, was the man himself, Mike Love, standing out on the terrace behind the big house with Mrs. Robideau, the homeowner. He chatted her, jollied her, and goaded, by his mere presence, the Hoe-Down dirt-crew to hurry up.

Actually, the Hoe-Down boys weren't that far behind. They were even now wrapping the job and doing the last clean-out of the hole. Rick, on the

backhoe, reached down its arm and laid its bucket on the pit's floor, and everyone scurried around with shovels, scooping up loose spoil, carrying it over, and dumping it in the bucket.

At the very end of the operation, as the bucket was just lifting out, Rodge —a guy too fat for an undershirt that always wore one—old Rodge pulled a closing stunt: he ran after the rising bucket with a last clod of dirt in his hand and leapt up, as if for a lay-up, to hook it in …

And stumbled as he leapt, and fell headlong.

"My *foot?* My fuckin' *foot!"*

Everyone converged, hauling him up off the ground and sitting him down against the wall. Flooding him with queries about his injury.

"It's my *foot!* I stepped in a *hole!* My foot broke *through!* Christ, it *hurts!"*

Jack, their foreman, was right on him. "Where? Where's the hole?"

"Over there!"

Alert to any flaw in his pit, Jack rushed there, the whole crew rushing with him.

"I don't see any hole."

"There's kind of a little dip here, Jack. That feel soft to you?"

Half a dozen heels tried it in turn.

"Feels hard. What dip you talkin' about?"

"Feels solid to me."

"Me too."

There was in fact no hole to be found, but there was something about Roger's twisted foot. It looked wet, a thin, viscous sheen on the boot, the sock, and the ankle …

"It *hurts*, man! Jack, it *hurts!* It *burns!"*

"Don! Get Rodge in your truck! Take him down to General Emergency. Help him, guys. Toby—tell the formers the hole's all theirs."

Jack was no dullard. The chance of a flaw in the ground, of some buried pollutant even, was best not dwelt on, but quickly sheathed in concrete. Then the job would get done, and they'd get paid.

They shipped Rodge off and got themselves and all their gear out of the hole. Rick got the backhoe onto the flatbed and chained down. Jack called coffee time.

Jack had many admirable qualities, but the best thing was his seriousness about coffee. He had an urn of quality dark roast, bolted into its own

specially welded frame in the bed of his pickup. When the Hoe Down crew gathered around the bed of that pickup, they drank the good stuff.

Daryl appreciated it this morning as he'd done for years. In the last hour his body had finally, as his friend Brad would say, come back on line. He put aside the thought of how much more slowly it would do so through the years to come, and enjoyed his membership in this loose, basically good-natured band.

Everybody joked about the Toxic Sinkhole that only Rodge could manage to step in, while no one else could even find it. "But it *is* weird," said Tobe. "I did for a fact feel a soft place, almost a hole under my heel, but then the whole thing was hard again!"

"You *thought* you felt …"

Jack's truck was parked alongside the shale-tiled terrace, and now Mike Love and Amy Robideau reappeared on it, strolling toward its brink to overlook the next phase of the pool-to-be. Love was a big, handsome guy, flawlessly clean-cut. Rich homeowners loved Mike Love. He got on a warm, joshing footing with the wives, used a cordial, manly candor with the husbands. They all felt that their affluence and image were in good hands with Mike Love.

Amy Robideau came out laughing at some joke Love had told, and was asking, teasingly, "So, Mike, are we going to come back from Nice next week to find the pool all done, and full of sparkling water?"

"That would be a miracle, wouldn't it?" The pair of them stood at the terrace's edge, watching the formers down in the raw hole. The crew was unhooking bundles of rebar from the cable lowered by the boom on their truck. "On the other hand," Love smiled, "anything's possible."

Here the dirt-crew traded looks, and Jack rolled his eyes. He'd often expounded on how the general contractor could blow all kinds of smoke up the customer's butt, promise them the moon, while the subcontractors doing the actual *work* looked like the bad guys Taking Forever to get it done.

"You've gotta realize what I'm up against though, Amy," Love was saying. "Here's a case in point, the kinda stuff I gotta deal with. I got this fax from one of my suppliers this morning. Humor me here, and just read this out loud—I mean just *try* to read it out loud."

Mrs. Robideau scanned the sheet with amused disbelief. "My God!" And read out, "'Eeya Fuh Thaggin Thoo Loo Eeya Shaw Gaw Thoy!' This is incredible! His fax must've gone bonkers!"

“I tellya, Amy, not a day goes by … not a day goes by. But hey, why not think positive? Maybe your bathing suit’s the first thing you’ll unpack when you get back from Nice.”

Jack spat quietly in the dust beside the truck, and when the two had gone back into the house the crew had some fun on the subject of the general contractor.

Hoe Down’s day rolled on. They crossed the Bay to trench an irrigation system in the Berkeley hills. Daryl’s gloom resettled on his soul. *Digging your own grave* … The thought nagged him as he worked.

And that little scene on the terrace kept coming back to him. That was the oddest little moment there, when Amy Robideau stood and intoned those uncouth syllables above the pit. And it was all the odder because those syllables rang some kind of bell for Daryl. It was far and faint, but they rang a distinct note of familiarity. It seemed he’d heard those syllables somewhere, long ago …

- - -

Along with free rent, Daryl received, for his graveyard shifts in the cage, a key to one of the Hyperion Hotel’s staff showers.

The Hyperion was a faded, century-old hotel in the Mission District—a decent but decidedly frayed and funky habitation. The ‘shower’ was a big old clawfoot tub with a ring of dingy curtain suspended within it. The bathmats were soggy and the walls a bit greenish and dank. But the hot water supply was generous, and a pleasant breath of San Francisco night came in through the airshaft window.

Daryl put his clean clothes on the little bench and stripped out of his dirty ones. From the darkness of the airshaft came a breeze that stirred the shower curtains, and they touched his nakedness as he stepped in between them. Their clammy caress was faintly adhesive, like cold tongues on his skin …

He cranked up the hot water and hunkered down under the blast.

Ahhh! Hot water! It made you feel like you were getting a brand-new skin! Wonderful!

And just then someone—someone very *big*—whispered right behind him. Someone in the shower with him.

He spun around in the spray. Found, of course, just himself in this small hot rainstorm …

And then, once again, came a breath of speech, rain-blurred. Again he whirled … and found himself alone.

He realized, amazed at his own confusion, that the Whisper was just the peculiar rattle of the water on the shower curtain. As the spray deflected from his head and shoulders and hissed against the plastic, it was, by some auditory freak, damnably suggestive of something *whispered*.

Daryl marveled. The mimicry was so precise. It seemed to whisper, over and over, two words that he couldn't quite make out …

His body wanted to shower some more, but that insistent, intricate hiss was … irritating. He turned off the water and got out.

He was indeed tiring himself out lately. He felt his limbs' weariness as he toweled off, turning his back to the shower because he found the sight of it repellent. Its dingy plastic shroud seemed … fleshlike.

He was pulling on his cutoffs when a freakish cold gust from the airshaft muscled into the room. Shivering, he checked the window—nothing of course but darkness out there—but as he turned he saw that cold gust ripple through the curtains.

And saw in the curtains' shuddering, glossy folds a face emerge, a rippling face as pale as the moon.

More exactly, the lower *half* of a face: a long-jawed mouth that moved between hollow, haunted cheeks, and whose lips shaped two soundless syllables.

A *drowned* half-face it seemed, as if the curtain were a liquid surface that it floated under. Filling half the curtain, it was almost a giant's mouth, both mournful and afraid. Once more, it mouthed two soundless syllables … and was gone.

Daryl stood there. It wasn't exactly terror, and it wasn't exactly astonishment that filled him. He felt as if he were covered with fur, and all that fur was bristling.

Woodenly he climbed the two flights up to his own floor. He was not terrified. He was … split. Halved. He was he. This hotel was itself. But the man in the bathroom a moment ago, the man being whispered to by a giant's face in the shower curtain … that was someone else.

Sane, tired people Saw Things. Accepted wisdom. *He* could accept it. But why see *that?* It seemed to Daryl he was confronting two distinct strangenesses in himself: the strangeness of Seeing Things at all, and the strangeness of hallucinating huge, speaking mouths …

You never realized how much you trusted your eyes, until they did something like this to you. His eyes cringed now from what they saw, distrusting these long-familiar halls. He forced himself to stand and stare, challenging the doors, the walls, the worn carpeting to erupt with some second strangeness.

Back up in his little room, Daryl sat at his desk and uncovered his old Olympia Portable typewriter, a relic from his college days. Sat there a long time, his calm returning slowly. Here he was, himself. His mind, his memory, themselves. A fifty-year-old guy, a strong old guy, but tireder than he'd realized. And in a little stack of text by his typewriter was his remedy for that weariness.

For the past few months his old college bud, Brad, had been giving him copy-editing jobs for users' manuals and the like, humoring Daryl's computerless seclusion, accepting his typescripts and scanning them into his own computer.

Brad was keeping his eye out for a full-time opening at Digitel. If one came up, he promised to get Daryl into it and bring him up to speed. Daryl had been noncommittal, but he was noncommittal no longer. It was time to put the old white collar on. His heart had been telling him so since sunup, and his weary senses had just dramatically seconded the motion.

He found his place in the text. But his fingers, touching the keys, withdrew from them again. He looked at his airshaft window, as if some new strange thing might blow in through it.

When you "saw" things, they were the briefest blips, were fragmentary glimpses that your mind, instantly afterward, filled in with interpretation, with explanation. But this half-face … had persisted just a beat too long. Had been too truly *there*.

Unless that sense of duration had been part of the delusion.

Daryl had a well-developed will to work. He buckled down to the revision. Brad was coming by to pick this up in the morning, and Daryl had to be down in the cage at midnight.

The text was a user's manual for an answering machine. Since even before his college days, Daryl had been a good prose technician. He sank, comfortably at last, into the pleasures of skill, combing out tangles of prepositional phrases into limpidly concise directions. The clatter of his keys floated up the airshaft into the deepening night.

At length he was amazed to realize, while his fingers still danced, that he was within a page of finishing. He was typing fast, as he always did in the home stretch, and it suddenly began to seem that his keystrokes were echoing strangely. The clatter of them was accumulating around him, filling his room. His heart felt a stab of premonition, and the corner of his eye caught a visual hint, so that when he turned his gaze straight to the airshaft window, his shock was profound. It seemed every nerve in him melted, ran out of him through the soles of his feet: such was his terror to see, hanging outside the window, a pale face—a face entire, and man-sized, hanging within a sixty-foot pit of empty darkness, gazing in at him.

There was that lantern jaw, a mouth slightly agape, and black eyes wide, aghast. Eyes that seemed the very nailheads of madness spiked into the brain …

Daryl's fingers hung frozen. Through one whole heartbeat and its after-echo, the face hung there within his gaze, and its mouth made two soundless syllables in a silence so absolute that the two of them, the face and he, might have suddenly been sunk a hundred miles underground.

And then the face was gone, and the silence became the hotel's normal creaky quiescence in the hour before midnight—a hum of flourescent lights, a remote faint creak of beam and joist, a hint of muffled voices boxed in rooms here and there …

Daryl stood up. Dazedly put his head and shoulders out into the airshaft. Saw a lit window or two far below … saw a dim star overhead.

He sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the window. This … *this* was exceedingly scary.

It was exceedingly scary if it was real, and it was exceedingly scary if it wasn't real.

But how could he even *consider* its being real?

For one thing …

For one thing this face was *familiar* to Daryl. It was a face he'd seen before somewhere. Long ago, he was sure of that, but definitely seen. There was some comfort in this, the more he thought of it. The brain, he reflected wisely, was complex. It burned its own fuel and could sometimes see its own contents like realities.

So these hallucinations were partly like flashbacks. They weren't something out of nowhere; they were elements of his own psyche, of his memory stirring.

Daryl was solidly sane. He had never in his life doubted that, and he could not doubt it now. This was some inner prompting of his memory that was revealing itself to him through the scary new channel of visions. There was some meaning to these two hallucinations, and the meaning lay within his own memory.

He had never been the panicky type. He felt, in fact, a certain sense of excitement. *What next?*

His watch told him he had just time to finish the copy-edit before he had to be down in the cage for his last graveyard shift of the week.

He sat back down to his typewriter. Hands poised above the keyboard, he gave a long look to his airshaft window and then went back to work.

- - -

2:45 A.M. Daryl buzzed up the last of the bar-closers. He could go to sleep now, catch his four hours before the graveyard shifters began buzzing the street door. He lay sunk in his armchair, but found himself too anxious to sleep. Fear cruised his thoughts like sharks, fear for his aging body, fear for his perhaps too isolated mind … It dawned on him that we were sunk in our minds after all. And if visions seized us, really took hold of us, how were we to save ourselves?

The darkness that pale face hung in had been a solid thing. That darkness had bulged inward from the air-shaft, swelling its blackness against the bubble of lamplight Daryl sat in …

He had to admit he was chronically short of sleep, and depressed by his situation in life. Look where he was living! This century-old carcass of redwood, seven stories high, full of a creaky, cobwebby aura. And all around, the silence of sleep, a hundred people pumping sleep out into the night. He was also surrounded by a residue of *past* generations, all those strangers who'd moved through here and left their psychic echoes in the halls. All the transients come and gone, each one unpacking his little suitcase of solitary thoughts on yet another empty bed …

In short, this was the kind of atmosphere that people called "haunted," and after a while it could damn well make you see things. End of story.

At long last, Daryl's tired flesh claimed its due. He sighed, settled deeper in his armchair, and slept like the dead.

Till the first harsh rattle of the street door roused him, the returning nightshifters ringing to come up. Between buzzing them in, he ducked into

the cage's tiny bathroom, threw cold water in his face, did a wet-towel wipedown of his upper body, put on a clean work-shirt …

He took out his typescript and did a last scan for flaws. The pages read smoothly. All fine … each paragraph error-free … all good …

Whoops. Near the top of the last page, he read:

The Messenger 2020 get one also features a …

Get one? Where did that come from? He smiled. Subliminal advertising had no place in the user's manual—the reader had already gotten one.

And then he found the same senseless interpolation twice again in the last two paragraphs.

Get one get one get one. Some glitch in his fingers had transmitted this phrase three times to the page.

And Daryl realized that all these interjections had occurred after he'd hallucinated that face out the window.

The street door rattled once more, and he jumped in his seat. He buzzed back, and it was Brad who came up the stairs, tall, well-fleshed, humorous—but seeming to find something strange in Daryl's face this morning.

"You OK, Dare?"

"Sure! Just tired. Look here"—he was dabbing whiteout on the last page—"I just found these. Will these three little fix-ups here scan OK?"

Brad smiled. "Not a problem for current technology. Wanna grab some coffee on your way to the Bart?"

"Yeah, lemme wake up Kevin."

Daryl rousted the touseled day-clerk from his lair, then he and Brad headed down the stairs to the street. As they stepped out into the wakening roar of traffic, Daryl was hearing two soundless syllables—the same face mouthing their message to him from the shower curtain, from his air-shaft window. And the message was: Get One.

He said to Brad, "You know that Messenger 2020? Could you get me one, and help me set it up?"

- - -

A couple hours later, up on a sun-drenched slope in the Valley of the Moon, Daryl felt a world away from last night's apparitions. Not that they vanished, but they were distant, put in their place, boxed in the gloom of the far-off Hyperion Hotel. Daryl worked the innocent earth, laying irrigation pipe, and those apparitions were wisps at most, small brief things compared to this wide world, and his work in it.

But that evening, as he Barted back into the City from Hoe-Down's yard, that twice-seen face grew into a much more solid thing again. Being in the train rocketing through its great sinus under the earth brought the face back to him. The wild subterranean sensation of it was connected somehow to that mournful mad apparition …

It was humbling to find himself moved by such cryptic manifestations, but as soon as he got out at the Sixteenth Street station he went to a pay phone and called Brad.

Within an hour after that, his friend had come over and installed the Messenger 2020 in his room. He rose from splicing the phone-line of Jack's room to a modern phone-jack. "You're all hooked up. I've gotta say I don't see the point. The desk takes messages, and who ever calls you anyway? Who do *you* ever call?"

"Who knows who might call me?" smiled Daryl. And in truth the new machine squatting there excited him. Hadn't he begun to writhe in the narrow box of his life? And if perhaps that box had begun spontaneously cracking along the edges … And suddenly his grip on the vision's familiarity tightened a notch. The face was a writer's face. It was a writer he'd consumed amidst all the miscellaneous fiction he devoured in his first years at college …

They went down to the Silver Dragon and drank coffee at a window-table, watching Sixteenth Street and its Friday evening traffic of colorful characters. "I love this neighborhood," said Brad, "I really do. But I still don't get why you insist on living in it."

"It's magical!"

"It's funky."

"Lighten up. I've all but decided to take that job."

"'All but'?"

Daryl himself wondered why he had uttered that qualification. "Well, it's a big transition."

"For chrissake Dare, just come outta your cave."

"You're right. Of course."

When Brad left, Daryl gazed a while longer out the window. All the colors of neons and signals and tailights and headlights, all the races, all the streetfolk in their piratical costumes. It was a beautiful carnival. But was Daryl turning into one of the sideshows? Seeing visions, and now, hovering over an answering machine for word from Beyond…?

He had to grant that it was possible he had just taken his first step toward becoming a Whack. But in truth, he didn't believe it. Something was developing, a revelation from his own unconscious. What persuaded him wasn't the vividness of what he had *seen*, it was what his own fingers had *done: get one get one get one*. Whatever revelation awaited, it had spoken to Daryl from *within* him, not from Beyond.

He tried to bring himself another step closer to the Face's identity. An author's photo on a battered old paperback—he could come no closer than that. Lantern jaw, mournful apprehensive mouth, frightened eyes … Of the author's name, no trace.

He left the Dragon and went walking through the Mission for a while as the going-home traffic began to die down and the glare of headlights yielded to the constellations of the neon signs. An indefinable tang was in the air … a sweetness, a sharpness. Was it danger?

He walked for hours, enjoying the people, the lights, until at length he stopped in for a rest at the Skyscraper Bar.

Three beers to the good, he judged it was late enough to go home. Late enough to have … caught something in his new answering machine.

Back up in his room, with the hotel growing quiet all around him, he viewed his machine, its message indicator still displaying a bright red "0." Sitting hesitantly at his desk, feeling out of place in his home for so long, he asked what kind of fantasy he was slipping into here.

The phone rang, and he snatched it up expertly, as if his hand had been waiting for it, convinced all along that the Call would come.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Dare."

" … Hey, Brad."

"Got any messages yet?"

Though still half-tranced, Daryl had to laugh. "Yeah. A tip from the Cosmos. *Buy low. Sell high*."

"A tip from the cosmos, hmm … You OK up there, dude?"

"Let me weigh that … Yeah. I'd say I was OK. Life is interesting."

- - -

Sweet Saturday. Walking down the halls, he traded greetings and jokes with other late risers. From the cage Harry, the Hindu manager, beckoned him. "You going out, Daryl? Take these down to the office." Two boxes of old

paperwork stood on the carpet in front of the cage. Daryl took them up and started down the stairs to the street level.

“I’ll get these filed right away, Harry.” This was a standing joke, just as the term “office” was.

Down in the hotel’s little foyer, he held the boxes one-armed and keyed open a door set at right angles to the street door. Reached in and clicked a switch inside. A cluster of bare lightbulbs came on above an isolated table amid an acre of dark junk filling the unpartitioned street floor, a forest of floor supports crowded with the dusty generations of the hotel’s furniture, and the innumerable boxes of personal effects collected from vanished tenants through the decades.

Leaving the door on the foyer open for added light, Daryl stepped in and began following a crooked, narrow lane-way through the junk to the office.

He wasn’t halfway there when the heavy door boomed shut behind him.

There was no one in the foyer to shut that door, and there was no draft to blow it shut.

He advanced quietly, his heart still hammering, his ears straining for whispers to come from the dark-sunk shapes all around him. He scanned what seemed an archaeological wilderness around him: black stonehenges of stacked bedframes and mattresses, the monoliths of piled bureaus, the sarcophagi of old refrigerators, the scattered building-blocks of cardboard boxes … Through all this he moved, his feet slow, pulse thudding.

On the wobbly table he set down his boxes. Sat in the rickety chair and listened some more. His everyday self tried to mock him for sitting here like this, in an inner-city hotel basement, with his ears cocked like the Last of the Mohicans …

But the voice of his everyday self was small and far away.

Back in the raftered darkness, there was a soft crash—a flat, cushy impact that hit him like a slap in the face. He nearly jumped out of his skin, his heart galloping, galloping … He’d done this to himself! Had let himself believe, if only for a moment, there was Something reaching out for him. And now, this impact. Something falling with no imaginable cause.

He advanced, step by halting step, into the shadow encircling his cone of light.

Past big-shouldered bureaus and teetering stacks of boxes, he threaded his way to the south wall … and back along it … and there. Half-hid in dark, a box lay on the path, toppled from its perch.

His eyes had shown him phantoms, his fingers had spoken unknown to him, but here he was, picking up a battered old cardboard box, feeling its soft, wrinkled hide, its weight in his hands. The sensation of holding it took his breath away.

But when he had carried it back to the light and dumped its contents on the table, he beheld no more that the cheap clothes and oddments that some vanished tenant had left behind.

Daryl picked through it and found faded T-shirts and jeans, a comb, a hairbrush, a toothbrush all dry and dusty with age, a yellowFrisbee that looked as if it had been chewed by a long-ago dog, a bleached-out pair of tennis shoes, a cheap Tijuana butterfly knife, a battered Bible, a much-thumbed pocket dictionary, and a little desk calendar printed by Bob's Plumbing for 1973, with not a single notation on it …

Grinning at himself now, nodding his head as if someone beside him were saying *I told you so*, he idly tugged at one of the T-shirts that had felt slightly heavy … plucked at it, and saw a battered old paperback fall out of it.

On the cover, a big skull with the eyes still in it. *At the Mountains of Madness*.

Bells were ringing for Daryl. He turned the book over, and there was the little postage-stamp-sized black-and-white photo of the haunted-looking lantern-jawed man! H. P. Lovecraft.

The longer he stared at the little photo, the bigger the basement's shadows grew around him. It seemed to stretch for blocks in all directions, this pillared darkness and its multitude of relics. His wild flight through the earth on the BART came back to him. He suddenly felt that he was in an endless subterranean maze, and that some mighty evil thundered through it, zigging and zagging, sleeplessly seeking him.

Or was it the evil tale in this book that his memory echoed with? He opened it.

Within a few pages, long stretches of the narrative were already coming back to him. An ancient alien race found still living under Antarctic ice. After thirty years' absence, Daryl reentered the dark places of this strange account …

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Two hours later—somewhat dazed—Daryl stepped out onto Valencia Street into a honey-gold afternoon. He set himself to walking around the Mission,

awkwardly for a while, and even when his gait grew smoother, the ice and dire black mountains that now filled his brain were starkly dissonant with this golden day.

What had these glacial horrors to do with him? It was as if, with ghostly fanfare, the Beyond had delivered its message to the wrong man on the wrong world.

But a message *was delivered*. The hallucinated face had broken through again to Daryl's life. He had it in his *pocket*. The message was utterly cryptic, but it had been thrust before him.

At length, he gave up wrestling with his amazement. More was going to be shown him. Could his life have changed so quickly? From a grim trap to an ascending path of wonder and discovery? All he knew at this point was that he had been marked out for a revelation.

He found that he'd strolled all the way to the Skyscraper Bar, and so he went in. There was a goodly crowd in here of mellow Saturday drinkers warming up for the night.

"Hey, Daryl! Joo hear about Roger?" And here was his fellow dirt-man, Don.

"Hey, Don. Lemme buy you one. How is he?"

"Shot a well-bourbon and a draft beer back," said young, hearty Don to the bartender. "He's fucked up! It was bizarre! You remember how his boot was all slimed? Thanks." Don downed his shot. "I drive him down to Emergency off Potrero, they get his boot off, and by then he's almost *screamin!* Thanks." He took the draft beer, downed that too. "They hadda *cut* his socks off! And underneath? He had like second-degree burns all over his foot and ankle! I shit you not! I just went back to the hospital this morning with Jack to see him. Jack was like petrified about a workers' comp claim, OSHA coming in, exsettera, but guess what? While we're there in Rodge's hospital room, Jack gets a call on his cell from Mike Love! Love's saying he heard one of our guys got hurt? Long and short, Love tells Jack that he can offer Rodge fifteen K cash, same day, if he signs it off as an off-job accident!"

"No shit?"

"I was there! Jack was so surprised, he told me everything!"

"So did Rodge take it?"

"You shitting me? Fifteen K in hand? A guy like Rodge?"

"Man! Love must really want this pool signed off."

“Sure. Wants his pay, just like the rest of us.”

But Daryl couldn’t help thinking that Mike Love had never before paid any attention at all to his subcontractors’ problems, unless absolutely forced to do so …

Hours later, walking home through a night grown misty and sharp, he thought of Love again. There was something about those harsh syllables he’d made Amy Robideau intone above the pit. The last three syllables. Shaw gaw thoy. *Shoggothoi?* Could it have been? A foretremor of this book he had just … been shown?

Some ghost-web seemed to have snared his life and was pulling his world in closer around him. There was terror in it, yes there was … but there was also that secret pang of exultation.

He took the flights faster and faster up to his room, the crackly old rubber carpet-runner making a quickening cricket-noise as he climbed …

The message indicator of his new machine still glowed its scarlet zero.

- - -

nt by. The Hoe Down crew spent all five days of it laying pipe. Days of sun, but days that were cooling and shortening. The autumnal equinox was almost upon them. During the breaks, neither the Robideau job nor Rodge were ever mentioned. Jack had set the example on that score, and the crew followed suit.

Evenings, Daryl came back up to his room to find an unvarying “0” on the machine and sat down to fix more of Brad’s copy—a heftier manual this time, for a new laptop.

Each night before turning in, or going on one of his graveyard shifts, Daryl checked the pages he’d just typed, looking for unconscious messages from his own fingers. He found not a one.

On his nights in the cage, he fell asleep promptly when the 2:30 A.M. lull hit. He was now convinced that the deep-night silence was wormholed with a silence deeper still, and that Something stirred beneath that silence. But he also knew that whatever this sleepless presence was, it would accost him when it chose, and until it chose, nothing he could do would bring it nearer.

And the result was that he slept deeply, trustingly, sure—or almost sure—that the Impossible would come to call. That the Impossible had chosen him for something. And what an odd, dark happiness that gave him! He scarcely

knew himself through these strange, half-expectant nights. He was a man already embarked on a rare voyage …

On Friday, his crew ran an eleven-hour day and finished trenching the vineyard. Daryl trudged up to his room and fell into bed, not waking up until noon.

He jumped right off the bed and checked the machine, yet still it showed him its scarlet Zero.

Daryl felt all at once almost unbearably impatient. It occurred to him that today Amy Robideau would be returning home from Nice, and for some reason he found that thought disturbing. His heart was pounding, as if he had been running through a wide, dark place, with something darker still speeding after him …

He had to stop *waiting*, obsessing. Just stop it. Go out and have a Saturday. If it was going to come, it would come.

Once made, the resolution proved a great relief. He went down to the Silver Dragon: bacon, pancakes, eggs. Took the bus to Market and shot several hours of pool, happily into it, getting four- and five-ball runs going …

Took the bus on back up Market, down Mission, and strolled into the Skyscraper Bar. And there he found Don again, this time with Toby.

Don felt pent up at work on the subject of Roger, and they were really chewing it over now. “He stepped in *something*,” said Don. “I didn’t see any hole, but—”

“I didn’t see any either, but I tell you I felt a soft place under my *foot*. And I’ll tellya what Rick said. He told me that when he laid his bucket on the hole’s floor, it didn’t feel solid. Said it felt like he was knockin’ on some kinda space down there.”

“Yeah, yeah, his bucket’s his third hand, all that. But hey, how much solid do you need to hold up a swimmin’ pool? And we’re talkin’ about something small here, some kinda leak.”

“Well,” Toby said, a little miffed, “the point is those fuckin’ hills are supposed to *be* solid. I mean, don’t you think a hollow down there is *interesting?”*

“What *I* think is interesting,” Daryl said, “is those burns on Roger’s foot.”

“Exactly! There was some kinda hole we missed. Where else would that caustic shit come from?”

“But how did it fill itself in?”

“It didn’t. We just missed it.”

“No way.”

They batted it around and got moderately buzzed, as the shadows lengthened outside.

Daryl rose and stretched. All strange business felt comfortably remote. Night was falling, the streets lively with a happy Saturday energy. “I’ll see you guys. I’m gonna take in a movie.”

But as he passed the Hyperion, he darted inside to get some cash, climbed up to his room … and saw the scarlet “1” on the Messenger 2020.

He sat on the edge of his bed, and took a deep breath.

Pushed *play*.

A staticky hiss—the vast whisper of electromagnetic void. And then—it was a hiss, a gasp, not a voice—

… The pool! The pool! Sssseeee, and knooow …

They coruscated along his spine, these crackly ghosts of words.

Five words, and an additional, unspoken word, which was the word *Now*.

Daryl had been right. Revelation was at hand. He just had to get to it. *Now*.

Back at the Skyscraper Bar, Don and Toby were slouched in exactly the postures Daryl had left them in.

“Don!” he blurted. “Listen. Something seriously urgent has come up. Will you lend me your truck? Will you *rent* me your truck? Just for tonight?”

“Whoa. Whoa. It’s Saturday night here, Dare.”

“Just stay here and drink beer for another three hours—all your beer on me!”

This piqued Toby. “We haven’t been sittin here drinkin beer for three hours!”

“Closer to four, Tobe. Come on, guys. This is something I just can’t explain.”

“You should explain it,” smiled Don. “Maybe it’s someplace we wanna go too, and we’ll take you there.”

Daryl’s urgency was great. He didn’t care who else saw, if it came to that, but *he* must see, whatever it took.

“OK,” he said. “I have a source, and I won’t say who. Something’s going to happen tonight at that pool we put in, and I have to be there to see it. It’s

happening *soon*. If you wanna come with me, come, but answer me quick yes or no, because I'm going one way or another."

- - -

Don's battered pickup climbed grassy rises. The oaks were black giants silvered with the gibbous moon rising above Mount Diablo across the Bay. They'd driven high up in the Marin hills, and all the way up here Toby and Don had pried at Daryl's silence. He would't budge.

At last, he answered them. "Here's what it is. You'd think I was crazy if I told you how I know this, so I'm just not fuckin *telling* you. But something's going to happen at that pool."

"*Something?"* asked Toby.

"Something … terrible, I don't quite *know*. And my, like, mission is to see it, and know it. That's all."

"Are you"—Don was trying to strike a sympathetic note—"having some sort of mid-life crisis, Dare?"

"I never claimed this was sane. All I said was that I'm going to *do* it."

"Well hey—" young Don said sincerely, "I'm down with that. Totally."

"Totally," echoed the older Toby, who looked a little more apprehensive. It seemed he'd recognized Daryl's fear beneath his determination. Perhaps had caught some of that fear himself.

When they were a couple hundred yards downslope of the Robideau property, they pulled off the road and parked in the shadow of some madrones.

They got out. "Guys," Daryl said, "I feel I've got to emphasize. I'm supposed to see something here. Be some kind of witness. I don't think I'm supposed to interfere, so I don't think *you* are either."

"Hey," said Toby, his voice already pitched low though the house was a quarter-mile off. "If we're snoopin in their yard, I'm gonna stay well back and under cover. You think we want them calling the cops?"

"OK. Good. So. Let's go … see what we can see."

They set off upslope through the grass, circling wide around to the rear of the property. It was a beautiful night. A fresh wind licked the pale grass like a great cat's tongue, and the Bay was a vast burnished blade of black steel. The rising moon had washed out only half of a sky thick with stars. There was something impalpable in the air tonight. On the loose like a pack of invisible beasts. A craziness. A kind of hilarity.

As they hooked back up the slope, they began to see the back of the Robideau residence. The glass walls and doors that fronted the terrace were all lit up, colorful light was spilling out of them … a tumult of shapes moved within. There was a party going on inside.

The sneaking trio moved up to a knoll above and to the right of the terrace. The plantings up here hadn't quite filled out and gave them good cover they could see through.

"Can you *believe* that?" hissed Toby. None of them could. They gaped as at a miracle.

The pool was finished, and full of sparkling water!

Chrome ladders, black-tiled borders, white-tiled deck surrounded it. The water lapped gently in the wind and sparkled.

"How the *hell* did they do that?" Don's amazed eyes looked stark white in the shadows. And Daryl inwardly agreed that this alone was almost miraculous.

"Look," hissed Toby. "That's whatsername, Amy."

Wearing a black bathing suit, Amy Robideau slipped out of one of the smaller doors opening onto the terrace. She hurried towards the pool, unnoticed by the party within doors. It seemed she was a temporary fugitive from her own festivity.

- - -

Amy would be in and out in three minutes. She didn't care if anyone spotted her doing it, in fact thought it might be fun if she were spotted. People could admire her new tan.

It was just that she *had* to feel the silkenness of it, that water in her new pool. How had Mike Love managed it? It was a miracle! She hadn't told her friends that this would be a swimming party, because she didn't know the pool was actually finished till they got home early this evening. She would gladly have shared it with her friends, but things being as they were, she couldn't deny herself one little secret baptism. They probably would notice her doing this—they'd ask each other where she went to, they'd see her out here. Would come out. A great laugh. She'd explain, and they'd see her Côte d'Azur tan …

She aligned her toes on the pool's glossy black rim, but before she could jump in she just had to stand and admire for a moment. Just look at what Mike had accomplished! All this tiling! And how had he gotten the *water* like this? The water was truly amazing—so limpid, but at the same time so

textured with little cross-currents, so veiny with exquisite snaky little filaments of bubbles. He *must* have installed some new kind of sitz or jacuzzi pump.

Amy felt that slightly thick-throated pleasure of possessing something unusual, enviable. This silvery-shuddery stuff wasn't just water, it was the kind of water only some people could afford. A prize possession, rich and strange.

She'd meant to be quiet and discreet about jumping in, but her pool roused a mad glee in her, and she decided to do a cannonball, splash this water high and wide across the terrace, bring her friends out to see.

Amy was buffed and treadmill-tough. She got a good strong spring from her cyclist's thighs and arced out over the water, hoisted and hugged her knees, remembered to jerk her shoulders backwards as she entered, to snap her waterspout high and far.

But *strange!* No splash! No waterspout thudding up behind her.

She slowed to a perfect stasis about three feet under. Hung perfectly fixed in the water, neither buoyant nor sinking, just *hanging!*

She'd never had water *hold* her like this. It was silken. A delicate, velvety support against every square centimeter of her body's surface. She hung astonished at this novelty for three slow heartbeats, forgetting that she wished to rise and breathe.

But then she was rising. The *water* was rising, contracting itself like a giant fist and towering up from the pool's bottom. She was rising like a bubble suspended within this surging liquescent tower.

She hung there, fifteen feet above the rim of the pool, was aware that she had not breathed for a while, was aware of moonlight filtering down into her crystal cocoon.

She looked down (how slowly her eyes moved!) and, far beneath her, the pool itself seemed different … where were the tiles? The deck? There was nothing but a cement hole down there!

But now Amy was moving. She was plunging silkenly forward and downward. Her liquid tower was toppling across the terrace. She looked dreamingly around her as she toppled and she saw, behind the oleanders, three strange men standing, staring up at her in awe. Blue-collar types they looked like, a little scary … what were they *doing* in her plantings at night?

But she was plunging across the terrace now … Here came the glass doors, flanked by their glass walls. There was everybody partying inside,

more and more of them turning amazed and seeing her now. There was Milly, there was … Rick? Suddenly, her eyesight seemed to be dissolving … here came the doors, the glass wall …

- - -

Like gaping zombies, Daryl, Don, and Toby stepped out of the oleander. They staggered to the edge of the terrace. They weren't trying to interfere, they just couldn't help themselves. They were six eyeballs, that's all there was to them. They were accomplishing the first part of their mission. They were seeing.

The liquid mass, in rising from the pool, had stripped it. Had *been* it. Chrome ladders, tiled rim, tiled deck—all melted into the towering liquid. Only the bare, unpainted concrete pit of a pool remained behind when the great crystalline mollusk swelled across the terrace, Amy Robideau hanging in its forefront like an amazed mahout who'd sunk inside the flesh of his huge mount. Her body was becoming smoky, its outlines growing vaguer …

Just before impact with the glass, the fluid split into two wings, and as it did, Amy herself divided, snatched into two cloudy halves as, with a whack of ruptured glass, the wings of the wave poured into the house.

At that impact, most of the party was already gaping out at the glittery tsunami's onrush. How slow they all seemed, all those happy people! Seeing what was coming, but no one moving, all of them freezing as the crystal seethe poured ten feet high along the walls, speedily embracing the entire crowd, while the central mass demolished the doors and the whole pool came inside.

The house was an undersea grotto, everyone floating off the floor, their startled faces so slow to change expression, to turn to wonder. Their rolling eyes asked each other *What is this? Is this not strange?*

It was a suspended, sub-aqueous party now. Everyone's torpid gestures of astonishment seemed gestures of acclaim, of dawning rapture. Their martini glasses floated out of their loosening fingers, their garments billowed like tidal life in the gentle currents of a primordial sea.

And then there began a blossoming of their flesh. It clouded from their heads, their faces swelling out of focus, each face becoming an organic nimbus as slow-expanding as a nova to a telescopic eye …

And soon, soon after that, their bones leaked like smoke from their sleeves and their collars and pantlegs, but still they all moved, their clothes

continued boogying together for a while, still roughly assembled to the shapes of their vanished bodies. A relaxed party of Tasteful Casuals …

And then, convulsively, the fluid contracted. The three men, at some instinct, recoiled in panic back into the plantings. The living liquid surged from the frames of shattered doors and walls. It swelled up into a huge crested slug as it poured back across the terrace. Though still translucent, it seemed a more sinewy liquid now, its moonlit crest showing a bubbly texture that bunched and flexed like snake-muscle.

At the pool's brink it paused and arched up high, higher, a giant, transpicuous nematode whose outlines melted endlessly, yet never lost their shape.

It dove upon a little drain-grate in the pool's bottom. Its whole length poured into the smooth pit and, with a wonderful concentric rippling, its heaped mass swiftly diminished through that slight aperture to the Underground …

At the last, its shrinking ripples were much darker, its substance black as tar, a pool of tar muscling into the earth.

It was gone.

On wooden legs the three men lurched back out across the terrace. They gazed upon the remnant of the party: a snowstorm of glass shards across the floor; empty clothes, empty glasses everywhere.

It seemed the three of them would stand there forever, struggling to absorb the absolute reality of these strange remnants.

Until they remembered the reality of something else, something that moved beneath them through these hills.

They left the way they had come, downslope through the moonsilvered grass, and then back up towards the road. The night wind made the grass whisper against their legs and made all three feel—as if for the first time in their lives—the vastness of the night sky.

"Daryl," said Don. It didn't quite sound like his voice. "Who told you about this?"

They kept climbing in silence while Daryl sifted through all he knew, and all he didn't. They had reached the car again before he answered.

"I'm gonna lay it all out to you. I'm not saying it'll make sense. I'm just going to share what I know, including what I know about shoggoths."

THE RECRUITER

*“But the **wakened** dead’s doorways, once opened, gape wider.*
Through these you may go where the galaxies sprawl,
And up through the star-web dance sprightly as spiders,
And dart quick as rats through Time’s ceilings and walls.”

Late in the day, Old Chester Chase walks down the hall from his room, headed for the stairs. His legs have seventy-five years on them, but normally he’s not as tottery as this. Today he must walk wide-legged, as if the danger of falling has suddenly increased.

He passes the barred window of the cage. Elmer, the day clerk, is in there, lying on the couch and watching TV.

“’Lo, Chester.” Elmer’s a scrawny old rooster in an undershirt, with thick goggle-glasses and a phlegmy voice, but he’s not old like Chester, not near-the-end-of-it old.

“Hi, Elmer.” Chester’s own voice sounds far and faint to him, like dead leaves blown down a sidewalk. Creaking down the two flights of stairs to the street, he’s seized by sorrow. All the funky details—this carpet-runner, these banisters—seem to glow, perilously precious. In the bubble mirror at the stairs’ turning, he sees himself, big-headed, skinny, an old man on his way out.

He pauses to confront the steel-framed street door, battered and shabby, but implacable when you’re shut outside it. Stepping through, he stands outside of the Hyperion Hotel, his home for the last five years.

The homeless are in evidence on this busy street in San Francisco’s Mission district. A pair of them—smudged, multi-sweatered shapes—sit on a porch stoop just down the block. Normal folk know the socio-babble explaining these roofless souls, but when viewing the vagabonds, their eyes betray a more limbic response: that these dirty squatters are a kind of spontaneous alien growth. Chester has long known that many of them make their debuts on the streets from the doors of shabby old residence hotels just like the Hyperion. Even he, once so carelessly strong, has just crossed that threshold.

He worked shipyard for years after he and Emily got married, and for decades after that he drove tour busses. He'd had a touchy side, had fought with officious bosses now and then, but he also had a gift for the work, loved sharing the world's most beautiful Bay with his passengers.

For the worst years following Emily's passing, the driving was an anaesthetic for her absence. A few years after that, BayScape Tours laid him off, and he couldn't get hired by anyone else. Their various so-sorries meant simply that he was too old.

Since then, even if he doesn't eat at all, his Social Security can't quite make his rent. The past three years now, his elder sister Samantha up in Portland has sustained him with her slender checks, and he has just learned that she died two weeks ago. The last installment of her pension bought the coffin she was buried in.

Chester walks and walks, and it seems to him his only countrymen out here are the ones on stoops, in doorways, in alley mouths. They are snug for now in blankets of pills and Night Train, or, like fanatics, they radiate a fierce insistence that they *do* exist, despite not owning one square foot of roof or wall. Laired everywhere they are, in little nooks of nowhere they've staked out.

Block after block he walks as the dark settles down, and with the work of it a memory of his old strength comes back to his legs; he breathes a tonic in the night air. But still there is only nowhere after nowhere that this strength can take him to. He's always loved the Mission's nightfall, with its neons blossoming everywhere, but now that it has fallen on him, he's reminded that night is the biggest Nowhere of all.

Just past midnight, Chester drops onto a bus-stop bench. Be a man! Here's where he'll sleep tonight. Try the night on for size, before being thrown into it. He lies on his side, knees drawn into the skirts of his coat, upturned collar his pillow, trying to ignore how hungry he is and wishing for the vanished muscle, the sheathed chest and shoulders that could wield a rivet-gun long hours, that might have made the bench-slats softer. *Cold*. If he sinks into sleep in this cold, is there a chance it will painlessly take him? Like Scott, near the Pole?

Huddled, he feels a prayer fighting its way up into his throat. All the neons are dead now, but as he walked they made him think fleetingly of the stained-glass windows in church when he was a kid. My God, that Place where they used to send up their prayers to—whatever happened to it?

Right now, there's just the roofless October night above him, mist-drenched by the Bay. He manages a brief, embarrassed mutter: *Help me somehow. Somehow, please help me …*

He must have half dozed, is awakened by a sound, a faint friction behind him … a stealthy sound. From a streetlamp around the corner, light pools on the sidewalk. The tip of a shadow inches into view. A narrow prow of shadow, and slow, rather than sneaking.

A fellow denizen of Nowhere, whose shape is low-slung it seems, for the scuffle is near, and yet the outline is squat and long … and, complicating the silhouette, a skinny foreleg carefully advances. A dog, he thinks. A big old decrepit dog.

But no, it's a man who rounds the corner. Bent almost in half and plying a cane. A man Chester recognizes from the Hyperion. It's old Mr. what's-his-name … Canning?

Here now, *this* is age—old, old age indeed. Chester has seen him inching down the halls, his frosty eye peeping up from his grotesque stoop, crudely printed tracts protruding from the side pocket of his shabby coat. He's creeping right toward Chester's bench, arthritically extracting something from his pocket.

An answer to his unaccustomed prayer? Chester almost smiles. The sidewalk evangelist crouches at the end of the bench, his oblique eye an ice-chip. His grizzled jaw grins almost merrily. Such joie de vivre, so evidently near life's end. Chester can only admire and smile back. A long moment they gaze at each other. No sound from the whole wide city arises, not even a far whisper of tires.

And then, "Aaartah!"

"I'm sorry. What?" Chester realizes that the man can barely speak.

"Nnnn-yarrrrtah!" And then, turning to pantomime, Mr. Canning extends in display not a tract, but a wad of bills. Places the money on the bench, and next indeed draws forth a tract and holds it up. Gestures at the cash and brandishes his leaflet, a brow cocked in query.

"You're … giving me *that* … if I take *that?*"

Vigorous assenting growls and nods. Chester is stunned. Actual tears fill his eyes. The evangelist again extends the paper, and Chester receives it. In large, crude type:

OUR GOD
SHALL RAISE
THE DEAD

He looks at the stooped ancient, whose frosty eye seems to wink. Now Mr. Canning hands him the cash and, the instant Chester takes it, turns and creeps caning away. Awed, Chester watches him vanish. Luck! He walked out at random to face his fate and met Luck. Walked out … and *prayed?* Can he believe that? Maybe he can … His heart sends a tender salute to his sister, to her affection, to her faith.

He gazes on the cash. Now anything seems possible. For starters, he can eat. The dark is just beginning to pale. The sidewalks' emptiness feels friendlier: now he has a pleasant destination, the all-night Silver Dragon Cafeteria.

Turkey and potatoes and beans are his again! Hot coffee and cold milk! Hello, world—I'm back at the table. Five hundred dollars. A month's rent, and plenty in pocket.

There's almost a spring in his step as he climbs the Hyperion's stairs. Elmer, though groggy at sunrise, seems pleased by Chester's payment. Elmer would have been the one to take his key, to shepherd him out the door with his things.

Though dead for sleep, Chester lingers in the halls, trading shoulder-thwacks with morning-shifters on their way out to work, leaning at the bars of the cage for a while, commiserating with Elmer about alimony payments and his relentless ex. By God, how lucky he was to have his own Emily! There was something to him after all to have won and kept a woman like her. Maybe enough left in him still to win a bit more luck before the end.

Back to his room. Bright morning fills his airshaft window. He gets his shoes and coat off, gives up on the rest. Sighs and falls back on his bed, into sleep.

When he opens his eyes, the wan light of late day fills the shaft. He goes for a shower and, in clean sweats and socks, lies back down on his bed. Emergency has yielded to a faintly melancholy ease. Has he really prayed and been answered? Did that kind, crazed old preacher receive on his spiritual antennae the intercession of dear Emily, sweet Samantha on his behalf?

Chester will go to St. Anthony's tomorrow. Ask to volunteer. It might even lead to some paid work. He must answer mercy with action. Is a God who RAISES the DEAD really impossible? Wasn't he feeling almost dead last night?

If he has been helped, his life has not merited it. He guesses his life has in fact been pretty selfish. *Remember driving over to the City that night? You'd dropped in on Charles and Frances and their new baby, and crossing the Bay Bridge back over, you suddenly knew you would never be a father.*

He remembers the afternoon when he first made love to Emily. Still only engaged, they did it on her parents' couch. Though her parents were away, the couch seemed less sinful, more provisional than one of the beds. Remembers how they both cried out in surprise and delight.

All those times all those years you could have been kinder. Your three nights a week at the bar because your work had earned them! All those hours of hers you could have made less lonely, all those hours you could have had closeness and sweetness together.

He remembers all the ships he worked on, with fantasies of him and Em seeing the places they'd been … remembers a couple of women he'd had on the side, in his still-swaggering middle age. Did she know and love him anyway? …

Has he been dozing again? Deep night fills the airshaft, yet the human traffic in the halls and on the floors above him is only now starting to dwindle, and he realizes that it's Friday night. Realizes too that for some time he's been hearing another kind of movement.

Not hearing, exactly. It's more like feeling. A faint, tactile ripple that draws his awareness slowly up stairwells, up airshafts, and down along hallways throughout the big, rambling, century-old box of a building.

He's never felt any sensation quite like this, and expects it to subside into the mere metabolic buzz of his own uneasy nerves. But no. Losing none of its furtive sublety, it grows more distinct. He can discern now that its movement ripples not just along the floors of the hallways, but across their walls and ceilings as well. And it has a familiarity, this movement, a quality both pizzicato and fluid. A childhood memory teases him, something about summer afternoons hiking in the hills around Mount Diablo … Those big green centipedes and the tarantulas they hunted on those hikes, the ripple of their little hooked feet across the ground … that's what these movements recall.

Chester gazes around the familiar room, stunned that he lies here surrounded by such sudden strangeness. His eyes fall on Mr. Canning's tract, and he sees that it is not a single sheet but a folded one, and is open, with lines of smaller print on the inside. He takes it up and, within that faint seethe of movement all around him, reads:

Where the lich in the loam has lain mouldering long
And the maggoty minutes gnaw meat off his bones,
There Time is a monster that mows down the throng
Of once-have-been, gone-again, featureless drones
And that lich's coffin to me is a door
Through which I go nosing Eternity's spoor.

But the wakened dead's doorways, once opened, gape wider.
Through these you may go where the galaxies sprawl,
And up through the star-web dance sprightly as spiders,
And dart quick as rats through Time's ceilings and walls!
There we go feasting and rutting at will,
Where time is a wine we imbibe when we kill!
There we conjoin with Gods older than All,
And preside with them over the Eons' slow crawl!

It's like melting, what Chester feels lying there, not understanding these lines themselves, but sensing that accepting them from that old man's hand … was a mistake. Surely there is this soft stir, this seething surrounding him now. It is a simmering of expectation. Whatever moves within these walls is welcoming a greater than itself. Something else is coming.

For a heavier, more deliberate footfall is moving down a nearby stairwell. Its tread is massive, though padded—a sinewy quadruped, he senses it to be.

Its big forepaw crackles on the hall's plastic runner. Chester's floor. Its muscled stealth moves up the corridor to Chester's turning … and down it. A faint click as of blunt claws stacattos its advance. The hotel is otherwise utterly silent.

Galvanized, he sits up to swing his legs off the bed—and discovers a terror that dwarfs what he's already feeling: his body has not stirred.

Violently, he again exerts his will … and his frame lies untouched by it, calm as sleep.

The visitor has stopped outside the door. Sharp-fingered cold starts touching Chester here and there.

Hello in there. Not heard. Directly understood within his mind.

Hello in there.

Time to prepare.

You and I must go somewhere.

The sly lyric drifts into his floating consciousness … But not just floating, for Chester is pulled, a kind of gravitation draws him upward. Gently, insistently, something is tugging the spiritous roots of his soul from his body.

He rises clear, a little knot of conscious atmosphere, and drifts toward the wall, trailing, it seems, only faint tendrils of body-memory, misty wisps of limbs. Is this death?

This Someone with him now, tugging him away, murmuring in his mind?

> *Faster, Chester! Chase, make haste!*
> *Let's go where they rest and fester,*
> *the hustlers finished with the race.*
> *All lie low now, slow with faster.*
> *Let's fly down and scope the place!*

If this is Death's voice, this sneering jollity, why is Chester's body still breathing down there on the bed? He cries out voicelessly, *Emily!*—as if she still lived to take hold of. Pulled more powerfully, he impacts the wall and pierces it, experiences chalky plaster and splintery laths. Next door, his neighbor Karl lies below, snoring in the dark. This room too he crosses, this wall pierces.

And is accelerating, till succeeding walls are rungs of a ladder of sleepers, each in his own dark. Last, he penetrates the hotel's outer wall and plunges out into the night air, the chill drench of mist.

Evicted. In a way he never dreamed of dreading. *Is* this Death? Buildings are pouring past him, the street a black river beneath. The Mission blurs under him until it yields to vast pavements of roofops spangled with streetlamps, sweeping downslope to the Bay. He too angles downwards,

toward a highway flanked by great trees. Chester recognizes this neighborhood. Colma. Cemetery City. Death *must* have him. Death beyond doubt.

Look where they moulder and crumble away
—How rank-and-file orderly is their array!
An army of underlings, mine to control.
Let's do some recruiting! Come down! Lend a soul!

Still diving, now much faster than before, beneath him a tombstone-studded lawn grows large, grows huge, becomes one grave to which alone he plunges, arrowing through sod, through soil, through wood and metal …

Once more he inhabits a body. A body in a box, in a suit, and within that suit clothed in a withered garment shrunken to the bone. If his terror had the least leverage at its command, this coffin and the earth atop it would explode into the moonlight, but his terror's the tenant of unmoving meat.

Unmoving … but unquiet. Someone shares this envelope with Chester. Tendrils of memory haunt the cadaver's parched terrain. Chester encounters scents he never knew, snatches of music he never heard, the terror of clutching a rifle under whistling bullets, hugging the sand in a desert war he never fought. The corpse's spirit threads through the bones he lies in. Those bones *stir*.

I bid thee to a journey, lich.
This is an invitation which
thou'lt not refuse. Within this hour
thou'lt know thy Master, and his power!
Now let reanimation start!
The butting skull's the bulky part.
So let it, Chester, lead the way,
and ram your passage through the clay!

The skull leaps, Chester himself a foggy commotion within it. The cranium, like a slo-mo fist, drives a sinus up through the stubborn soil.

Now from its rack unjoint each bone
and climb the rat-hole one by one.
Each rib and radial, ulna, femur,
scuttle limber as a lemur!
What rags of flesh that may remain,
worm after in a snaky train!

Chester pops into moonlight, his vessel the empty-windowed skull, hanging in air while the body joins him piecemeal from below. Soon his skull crowns a tall scaffolding. He has dangling arms, and hands which tatters of sinew and skin are bandaging. This reknit body still prickles with memories; they trickle into his hands like strays to a shelter, the feel of a sun-warmed kitten stroked, of a loved breast gripped almost too hard, of fingertips picking foxtails from an itchy sock. His legs too remember, treading concrete, and the weary work of sand dunes climbed, and the silvery feel of scissoring in the bright blue water of a public pool, while the summer clamor of a hundred splashing kids teases the tattered remnants of his ears.

Captain Chester! Ten-shun.

A chaotic tremor through the borrowed body, and it comes to a swaying straightness.

Let's all stroll down to the bus-stop, old buddy!
No one will squawk that you're smelly and muddy.
It's your own private coach, and your fare is pre-paid,
and no one will notice you're slightly decayed.
Let's give them the signal, Ches! Lead the parade!

Only now does Chester grasp—vertebrae crackling as he scans the field—that in the stone-studded acres a dozen other shapes stand, crooked shadows like himself, teetering here and there, while the towering eucalypti shudder and whisper in the breeze above them. Give them the signal? He

gropes for the memory of his own arms. Up comes his host's creaking arm and waves those others forward.

Tottering, drunken-footed, they move down the gently sloping grass, their march at first so feeble it seems accidental, while the starlit trees whisper

Yess. Yessss.

Ahead, a big shape squats on a ribbon of pavement: an old yellow bus with a jutting hood, doors folded open—the kind he remembers from school days.

Chester's lich mounts and takes the driver's seat. The wheel that meets his tattered grip feels like an eon-dead sorcerer's bone, necromancy burning like ice in it. The lich produces a gasping jest, mocking Chester's captive soul:

All aboard for the Bay Tour …

His slat-ribbed, staggery soldiers mount and file past him, gaunt jaws hanging agape in awe at a world regained. Their stark, thin fingers touch the air before them, feeling it like some long-forgotten fabric, while in the gulfs of their eye-holes memories glint like the dim stars that are suns to distant planets … They settle to their seats with an arid whisper, gaunt shapes rustling like dead leaves.

Filled with his Possessor's joy in this vehicle's power, he slips the clutch and treads the gas. The bus surges down the graveyard's laneways and swoop out onto the Highway. Oh, this is flight! No less majestic than a hawk's! Tilting the wheel is like banking their wings—they soar up onto the Bayshore Freeway.

Plunging through long graceful curves, the vehicle lofts into view of the dreaming Metropolis. The empty freeway lies like the spine of a black dragon draped on that city, and down along that spine they run.

He dares not know where he is driving. Like a man on the roof of his flooded house, he dares not descend into his captured mind, but undeniably he feels a great dread of the Bay and a *pull* from its glinting black plain.

They swing down an exit, through two swift turns, and here is Sixteenth. North they take it—Bay-wards.

Rolling down a corridor of lonely lamps and black windows, he is touched by his cohorts' wonder as they gaze on the emptied theater of the living, their wakened memories haunting his own.

Rocketing across Third, they turn onto the empty shoreside drive, wrench the bus crosswise to the street, and idle. Their prow is aimed at an open

stretch between two little forests of eroded pier-legs.

He tromps the gas. The bus jolts over the curb and through the fencing, jouncing at full drive down into the water.

Though muted under the sea's dark weight, their engine's roar thrums on, drags them unfaltering downward, the tires somehow biting the cottony silt, lifting its inky shroud around them, impelling their slow-motion descent of the Bay-floor.

Down here, the wide unpartitioned reach of the Undersea embraces his smallness, and he knows, *feels* that these deeps are inhabited. A shape half fills them, an alert colossus of cold intent … and *this* is their Summoner.

He knows now what he dreaded from the Bay: his being taken by this sunken thing.

But the seizure that comes is not what he is dreading. He's snatched up out of his host. Climbs the water in a roiling bubble. Erupts into night air and rises, rises …

The Bay's grand constellated rim below him now, his flight has paused. Chester hears again his Taker's thought.

Its Rule is thus: once served, released.
You've raised my quota of Deceased.
Obedient, I now thee dismiss,
And let thy life go where it lists.
But how thou goest's not prescribed—
Thine own path take where thou'd'st abide!

Time to get back to your meat-rack, ol' Ches!
You've been parted from him quite a span.
Can you make three miles' trek through the air, more or less?
I fervently pray that you can.

This mockery is his taker's farewell. Chester is alone now, he is free. Free to hang here, high in the night, a knot of being with not a muscle to command. How can he move? Will the next gust of wind blow him out like a candle? The whole world rolls on its mighty axis under his naked life, and he can't touch it.

Rage and bitterness rack him. On that bus-stop bench, in his extremity, he raised his voice in unaccustomed prayer. And now, behold Prayer's answer: the presence, in that water, of a something mightier than death. Not only his own life to gutter out in the air, not only himself to be taken from the world, but the world itself to be taken …

Up on the low hills, there is the red neon circle of a rooftop Target sign. Chester yearns to be there with it, a mile inland, a mile closer to his stolen body … yet he is only a yearning that cannot move. His yearning becomes desolation, desolation becomes rage, becomes despair, becomes a fiercer rage that *wills* that distant red radiance nearer.

But … has it grown fractionally *larger?*

He struggles to grasp his will again, wrestles in rage with its elusiveness, wrestles the rage itself toward that purer will … and again, so slightly, that bull's-eye nears.

It is such labor at first, lensing his longing into a beam as pure as laser, pulling the whole shore under him, a block at a time. His mind like a muscle cramps with the toil, till he learns that the inertia he struggles with is himself, is the clutter of his rage and fear. Though desperate, he must somehow will *calmly* … And ever more smoothly, the red ring grows, till he has pierced its center like an arrow.

It is well that he is learning this tricky art of focus, for again and again he loses it and must struggle to find it anew—because his cohorts still remotely share his mind and take it from him now and then. Still they lurch and dive, in a smoke of silt, down that drowned terrain. And now it is not quite ink-black, that storm of murk their journey raises. A purplish luminescence begins to limn the muddy roil. And he feels with his gravemates that they are all *beheld*, can feel the touch of a gaze possessing them. The light they approach is its darkly radiant awareness, and their journey is at its command …

Each time he fights off this knowledge, he focusses, drags himself onward landmark by landmark across the City. Nevertheless, at length with his gravemates he meets their Summoner, and at the last he learns that which he has so urgently wished not to know.

Still his own extremity commands him to his work. When finally he reaches the Hyperion, approaches the black Z's of its fire escape, he has thinned to a terrifying faintness, his spirit like a crumbling TV image

sprayed out by a faltering cathode-ray. But just the walls now, just the rooms full of sleep to be pierced, the rooms full of sleep …

But when he arrives at his own body on its bed, here at the end he's defeated. His body is too dense a mass to enter, and himself too frail and patchy to force his way in. Surrendering at last, he thinks of Emily and says his farewell to her. Remembers her touch on that body of his, how she held it, and kindled it, how she made him feel in it … and suddenly he is inside it.

Sleep engulfs him. Through the next day and into the following night it holds him, a cherishing hand in whose grip he is regathered, a kernel kindling in its healing closure. His dreams are not his own. The dead he wakened live again in him, their hours beneath the sun and stars, the treasures that their eyes and hearts collected on their paths: neon jewels reflected on a rain-wet street, the buttery ripple of foliage in a summer breeze, a hawk's calm crucifixion in the clouds, a love song echoed in a young child's eyes …

He wakes bolt upright and is sitting in a building once more sunk in silence. Nothing protects Chester now from seeing again what his gravemates encountered at their journey's end last night. He remembers the bus slowing and stopping on the sunken plain …

A storm of silt roiled around them, gorgeous billows of a purple glow. So slowly it resettled! But as it did, a revelation dawned. The subsidence was unveiling some kind of drowned Sun that lay on the seafloor. The fog thinned away, and It towered before them, Its somber radiance shafting down through the bus windows. A titanic eye. Deep-strewn stars wheeled within its gulf. It knew them. It summoned them. They rose … and obeyed.

Chester is up and dressing. Glad of his good, tough running shoes, his stout warm coat. Doubtfully, he draws from his pocket the substantial remnant of Mr. Canning's cash. He is struck with dread of the link it might form if he uses it. But at length he says, "Fuck it, I earned it," and tucks it away.

Once again Chester walks the empty night streets. Staggery at first, at length he gains purpose and strides. Tired he admittedly is, and old near the end of his life. Terrified too he most surely is and, even as his strength regathers, it is not what it was.

But he is fierce-eyed too, and by-God angry at his core, an anger to answer the dread that provokes it. He means to live all right, has found this

will clear and strong in himself for the first time in years. He means to live and means to fight, means to find allies if he can, knowing as he does what fills the great Bay, what embraces himself and his species in Its ageless, cold attention.

All he hopes for is, a little luck.

THE BATTERY

The Battery had actually been one, once. It was perched on a little spur of hills outthrust from an otherwise wide-beached Southern coast. Two centuries ago, this original Battery stood at the entry of a minor port—a bay now silted in and overgrown a hundred years.

That structure's sizeable pentagon of stone and its ten guns had commanded the inlet from a good twenty yards' elevation. Its dereliction led, by the turn of the twentieth century, to its being filled with stony rubble and capped with concrete to platform a new enterprise, commercial rather than military. Foundationed on its martial bones, the Haven of Health was a grand three stories high and—daring for its time—an hexagonal structure. It catered to the rich for a few decades, mineral baths, high colonics, medicine-ball workouts, but it did not long survive the Crash.

Not till the mid-Thirties did a new building sprout, a swank roadhouse. It was still higher-platformed than the Haven by its use of her foundation beneath its own. A rich bootlegger built it and named it for its deepest old bones: The Battery. This structure expressed Ricky Tomasi's implulse for flair and was roughly octagonal: a one-story sprawl of contiguous pie-slice lounges and dance-rooms. It overlooked the Atlantic from a good ninety feet above the waves.

Though in decay since the last quarter of the twentieth century, this structure had been minimally maintained by faceless titleholders, who rented out small, crudely remodeled units for storage and dwellings.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century drew to its close, only two of the rentals were occupied—by two couples who inhabited opposite sides of the rambling structure. They had first gotten to know each other through shared problems with the septic system every couple months or so. The men (to whose gender plumbing problems have immemorially fallen) met first. They would stand looking out over the densely overgrown leech field, and Ray Stone would say to Nolo Ceja, "Easy, I tell you it's all the old stonework. Old foundations under the ground here. They should never've built on this site."

With four decades dividing their ages, Nolo at first thought his tall gaunt elder to be somewhat vague and strange. Like Ray's calling him "Easy." When first introduced, Ray had remarked, "'Nolo'—unusual name."

The solid young man had smiled and said, “It’s Spanish, short for Manolo. But my old man used to joke that it’s short for *No lo hize*—I didn’t do it!” Somehow Ray had remembered only the *hize*, and called him Easy … though Nolo had decided that Easy actually sounded pretty cool.

He would answer Ray’s stange notion of *stonework* by waving his arm at the tangled slope. “The damn thing just needs to be bulldozed, Ray. If the soil’s turned it would *absorb*. I keep *telling* Scampi that.”

Ray would shake his head, as if Nolo just didn’t understand. “That stonework is *old* down there, Easy. Older than you can imagine …” It made Nolo wonder if he and his amiable neighbor were always on the same page.

Yet the third or fourth time they stood pondering the field, Nolo shared an odd thought of his own about the jungled leech field. “It’s funny, but it doesn’t really *smell* like sewage. It smells like … the sea.” And stood thinking how foolish this must sound, since but fifty yards behind them the whole Atlantic foamed to the shore below their promontory.

Staring intently at him, Ray said, “Yes, a *dead* sea. Some black, subterranean reach of it, festering in darkness …”

“That’s … that’s right.” And laughed uneasily at betraying his surprise.

Ray smiled. “You know, why don’t the two of you come over one night? Have some barbecue?”

That winter was a stormy one, the sea hammering their promontory with foamy fists that exploded halfway up the cliff, the ocean greedy for the earth they perched on. By March, you could say spring had come, but only because the drenching, gale-blown downpours alternated with sapphire skies where towering flotillas of white cloud scudded before the wind. Every day indoors Nolo and Adrienne navigated their own little seas of Internet, where Nolo’s website business was beginning to grow, and Adrienne’s editing service was doing well. On weekends when the gales abated, they went over to Ray and Estella’s apartment for barbecue on the older couple’s canopied and flagstoned patio.

The older pair, it seemed, sailed an even larger digital sea. Seven monitors peopled their cozy living room, all seven always lit—an “international info-network” of which they were the “East Coast mavens.” Vague about the info they trafficked in, they kept the unsleeping screens draped with Estella’s gauzy scarves when the Cejas visited, but this discretion never chilled the cameraderie. Bach and Mozart—faintly overheard from each other’s distant dwellings—had been ambassadors of their first acquaintance, and music

always regaled their get-togethers, as did the Stones' lively recollections of their travels, which seemed to have taken them everywhere on earth.

On a Saturday morning, all wind, sun, and sweeping cloud-shadows, Nolo drove his rattly old Volvo the twenty miles back from town, pleased to have another barbecue to look forward to that night.

He found Scampi's Eldorado and a van pulled up to one of the larger units, midway between his and Ray's. Plump Scampi, dark-suited, was combing back his well-oiled black hair, something Nolo considered a nervous trait, performed, for example, when Nolo asked him about the septic system.

"New tenant, Mr. Scampi?" The unit's door was open, and someone was using a power saw inside.

"That's right, Mr. Ceja. Very quiet. Single man. Indian fella I think, I mean like from India. Very quiet."

Unusually emphatic on this point, Nolo thought. "Well, I'm glad you're here. Got your receipt book?"

Normally decisive in such transactions, Scampi seemed distracted, and when a hammering commenced in the unit, he botched his receipt and had to write a new one. Looking up, Nolo saw that the unseen workman was sealing one of the two front windows from inside with a sheet of plywood. Strange …

"Ta-da!"

Adrienne looked up from her screen at grinning Nolo in the doorway, his arms spread in self-presentation. Broad-cheeked and small-chinned, Adrienne's sly smile showed more of the Arabic than the Cherokee in her. "A check," she said.

"*Two* checks. Paid the rent."

"Come to my arms!—but just lemme finish this page …"

Adrienne was built solidly, just like Nolo. Because lovemaking made her hungry, she often went for a run afterwards to avoid snacking. "It's two hours to dark," Nolo called from the shower, "and lookin' like rain again!"

"One hour max!" Knotting her track shoes. "You make the sangria!"

It did cloud over as she thudded down the country two-lane—no shoulder to speak of, but damn little traffic either. The road rose and sank gently between walls of trees. Her soles hammered the pavement, the gusts shouldering her this way and that. Wind-crazed crows flustered up from the canopy, swooped zig and zag, and dove back in again.

Rare spears of slant sun soon wholly surrendered to unbroken gray rack, like wooly mammoths in a sky-swallowing stampede. The glorious storm-energy swept Adrienne along.

Something big topped a far rise, dove from sight, then surged up the next rise, big in its shape and its noise above the wind. A dirty van, hauling a trailer full of tools, came at her mid-road, unregarding, and she leapt to a narrow shoulder, dodging it. Two big shapes in front, blank faces in bulky profile.

Those motherfuckers! And where else could they be heading but the Battery?

But back home an hour later … there was no sign of any van.

- - -

Rain rattled on the canopy, savory smoke tendriled up from the grill, and the *Goldberg Variations* stitched the wet night's noise with silver embroidery. Their feet toasting by two electric space-heaters, Estella Stone described the Giant's Causeway to the Cejas, while Ray basted the meat. "When you travel through Ireland," she told them, "you feel that this whole wonderful world was *built* by giants. That all of its *architecture*." A lean woman, almost as tall as Ray, the architecture of Estella's own strong face was lovely in its age, jaw and cheekbones elegantly lathed.

Her glances at her husband underlined his abstraction this evening. Though always more talkative than he, tonight she seemed to be masking his silence, and perhaps also an unease of her own. Sipping sangria after dinner, Nolo caught the flicker of Ray's glance into the living room, and some startlement at what he saw. He went inside and was heard keyboarding fiercely.

"A workaholic, what can I say?"—but Estella's face, watching him within, flashed with something. "Empty glasses!" she scolded. Did her hand tremor slightly, filling them? The Cejas' eyes betrayed they felt their hosts' unease, and conversation faltered. A gust blew icy spray beneath the canopy.

"Should we go inside?" Estella's glance indoors seemed to aim the question at her husband, the keyboard having fallen silent. "Come inside, guys!" Ray's tone did not quite succeed in sounding hearty.

When they'd closed the door the rain roared, as in anger at their retreat. Ray had an ornately carved little box in his lap, and when they saw the long look he traded with his wife, the Cejas sat silent. He took something out of

the box, a flat carven stone the size of his palm, and his hand closed slowly upon it.

"Is it … certain?" Estella almost whispered the words.

"It's coming."

Three slow-spaced knocks sounded on the door. Strange, those concussions—booming, and yet somehow far away. Slipping the stone in his pocket, Ray stood. "Please, my friends. Say nothing." How slowly he rose, approached the door … and opened it.

Upon a thin man enveloped in a long black overcoat. His hat too was black, and broadly brimmed … and not a drop of rain dripped from either coat or hat. Between his black-gloved hands he held a little leathern pouch.

But oddest of all was his face, so thin and narrow, the nose a blade, the smooth cheeks tapered to a pointed chin, the satiny skin a lustrous dusky hue. It was almost the abstraction of a face, save for the eyes, so spherical and stark their whites, not quite human, Nolo thought, until he realized that wrap-around clear spectacles enlarged and distorted them. They seemed almost ceramic replicas of eyes, bulging from that exquisite meager visage.

"May I come in?"

His voice. Had Nolo heard the words … or thought them?

Ray smiled a tiny, wintry smile. "You are already … in."

The visitor came one step inside. Nolo and Adrienne traded a look. The room had grown distinctly colder. "I am Mr. Ginunga. I dwell here now. I prize my solitude. I wish to purchase your respect. For my solitude."

So elusive that voice! A voice to only half of Nolo's brain, while to the other half its syllables were distant oboe notes, hisses of the falling rain, guttural fragments of faraway thunder. Mr. Ginunga held out his pouch.

Ray stepped forward. "We accept your offer." As he received the pouch with one hand, his other slipped into the pocket where he had put the stone. Mr. Ginunga bowed, and turned, and walked out into the storm.

Ray closed the door and emptied from the pouch a heap of heap of coins onto the coffee table. Gravely beckoned his guests. Old coins, only approximately round, each struck with a spindly little thicket of incised lines and triangles. Each with the heft of solid gold.

"These runes," Ray said absently, "are Old Norse." The Cejas looked from the marvel of the coins to the equal marvel of Ray's lack of surprise. He was gazing in Estella's eyes, and both were grave. She turned to them, "Nolo. Adrienne. You're our friends. Are you our *allies?"*

“What do you mean?”

“We would tell you to pack up and leave here for good. To do it tomorrow,” she answered. “But we both feel we’ve met you for a reason. We face here a danger, great and dire. You will always be our friends, but if you are not our allies you must leave this place at once.”

Nolo looked into Adrienne’s eyes, seeing a confusion as complete as his own. Both of them returned their eyes to the gold, reached out and touched it again. “This has to be a quarter million dollars,” Adrienne murmured.

“Closer to half a million,” Estella said gently. “He actually thinks it possible we do not *know* what he has come to do.”

“And what—” Adrienne had to clear her throat. “And what is that?”

“We cannot tell you. Never if you leave. Not yet, even if you stay and stand with us.”

The young pair looked at the old. *Stay and stand with us*. Looked again in each other’s eyes. Nolo saw that Adrienne had made a decision and was hiding it until she saw his own. He looked again at the elderly couple. His father’s old joke about *no lo hize—I didn’t do it*—reflected the fact that Armando Ceja had not infrequently stood before judges. He had been a warm and truly affectionate father, but a rough youth had cursed him with problems, and Nolo’s dad was now upstate and would be there a very long time. Nolo had always felt that—young though he was—he should have helped his father somehow.

“We’ll be your allies. What do we do?”

“The first step,” said Ray. “The reason that he gave us that”—pointing to the coins—“is because we have this.” And he showed them the flat, carven stone. “We’ve arranged for … some help, and now we have to set them to their work. Get your coats.”

Adriennne’s eyes met Nolo’s again—both remembering the unearthly music they had heard in Mr. Ginunga’s words—and exchanged a final, disbelieving yes.

Through the rain’s drench they trooped … to the spot where Ray and Nolo had often stood above the leech field. Ray held out the stone. “You must both touch it. When you do, our allegiance will become irrevocable.”

Adrienne touched it first. What met her palm was a raw mental voltage. Cyclopean vaults loomed over her, echoing with hoarse inhuman shouts, while upon a far jagged horizon titan towers hid their crowns in storm-wrack black and scarlet torn by mighty lightning bolts …

The amazement on her face had only partly readied Nolo when, in his turn, he touched the stone. And when he too stood reeling with the vision's aftermath, the two of them watched Ray kneel and lay the stone upon the leech field's earth. His lips moved, but the rain's roar obliterated his quiet words. Then he took up the stone, and pocketed it again. Estella looked at them and gently said, "Now you begin to understand."

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"You wanna talk about it?" she asked, scrambling eggs.

"…Yeah … but what can I "

A long pause. "They were … dead serious."

"Yeah. And that *stone*. What did you see? Like, landscapes?"

She nodded. "Is the stone some kind of hallucinogenic mineral? Or was it something we drank? Or maybe just the *mood*. That Mr. Ginunga. His *voice* … What's that?" She meant a sound of heavy concussions outside. Nolo went to the window.

"Look, babe."

When Adrienne looked out, she said, "Those fuckers!" She strode to the door, but when she tore it open, there was Ray, just raising his hand to knock. "Excuse me, Ray. I've got to talk to those assholes. They nearly ran me down on the road yesterday."

"Please. Adrienne. We, uh, hired them to work in the leech field. We already knew what was coming. We just didn't know how soon. May I come in?"

He placed a packet of bills on their counter. "Here's fifty thousand dollars. Part of Mr. Ginunga's bribe. In the contest to come, we will need physical resources, and it may fall to you to get them. Can I ask you to come meet our … employees?"

Pocketing the cash gave Adrienne a sense of having entered virtual space, and wielding the mythic windfalls featured in some video game—an impression not diminished by the workers they encountered outside, two extremely big men, uniformed in grimy coveralls, both rotund, massively limbed, with bland, bulging countenances oddly similar.

The van and trailer Adrienne had dodged yesterday were parked down the slope, half engulfed in the vegetation. The men's sledges were driving a line of steel fence-stakes across the upper quadrant of the field. Big though the workmen were, the casual, machinelike power of their hammer-blows was disorienting to Adrienne, like the breathtaking wad of wealth now in her

pocket. Something big was happening, and had engulfed her and Nolo. The remonstrations she'd intended died in her throat. "Why are they doing that?" she asked Ray.

"Because their work will be … somewhat unsightly."

They stood watching until the men had strung wire along the tops of the posts and draped a series of big, filthy canvas dropcloths over the wire, crudely fencing the site. Their tread could be heard crunching down the slope beyond. A pair of snarling gas motors roared to life. Rattling power-tools were heard at work.

Adrienne shuddered. "Christ, it's *cold*," Nolo said, putting an arm around her shoulders. It seemed, all at once, that they stood in a current of icy air.

"Oh yes," said Ray, turning around. "He's at work too, you see." They turned as Ray had done. They were facing the boarded-up windows of Mr. Ginunga's apartment, not fifty feet directly behind them.

"What do you—"

"Please, my friends. Estella and I must go back to work. Things will … develop, and I'll come to you when your help is needed."

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Two days passed. When Nolo and Adrienne tried to talk over the mystery enveloping them, they had to give up. In a void of information, conjecture faltered. They sat at their screens and plugged away at their work. Fell asleep holding each other, smothering fears neither could give a shape to.

"You hear that?"

Out their window, fast cloud-shadows were alternately blotting out and unveiling the reddish-saffron light of late afternoon. Nolo's head was cocked and, after a moment, Adrienne got it.

"They've stopped working."

The workers' power tools were silent. "How long, you think?"

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

In another half hour, Nolo shut down his computer. "I'm just gonna go and take a look."

Astir in the wind, the vegetation of the leech field had a strange distinctness in the violet gloom. Leaf and branch heaved and fretted, seeming to grow denser and lusher in the onrushing air. Awkward in the act of trespass, Nolo stepped round one end of the canvas screen.

The light was bleeding off fast. In the blur of the wind's rummaging, he made out down there a trampled zone, a pool of shadow, power tools lying

by, And more: a low, pale shape … no, *two* of them splayed out amidst the weeds. He trudged, tanglefoot, towards them.

Close, the shapes were startling, like trophies of some alien hunter in a different biosphere—big, filthy skins. They were, he realized, the scabrous overalls of the two workers, sprawling empty of their massive tenants. What was it that was so … disturbing about this shed gear?

Then another surprise. Just a little farther downslope, there was a ragged-rimmed hole, black and deep, perhaps six feet in diameter. He carefully neared it. Straight down into the earth it went.

He wanted to turn away, but found it hard to leave this scene. Hard to leave such a perfect strangeness, little though he liked it.

He stumbled more walking out than he had going in, but finally stood on the walkway circling his building. The cloud-wrack tore as it ran before the wind, and the first pale stars were glinting through the gaps. Did he hear something under the wind …? He must go talk to Ray and Estella, get some kind of grip on the situation. Had gone half a dozen steps in their direction when he heard a reedy voice behind him. “Help you? Help you?”

One of the workers, huge in his coverall. His broad fat face seemed twitchy, vaguely restive. His voice had a flutelike quality, though sketchy and broken.

“Well, I guess”—Nolo looked up at that vague massive countenance—“I was just wondering, um, how’s it going?”

“It going,” the man intoned, “… going.”

“Well … great! If you need any help, just let me know.”

“Need any help?” said the man. His face was so big. There was a strange ripply tension in it.

“Just let me know, yeah.” He went on toward Ray’s, though now felt he should be back with Adrienne, with these dazed giants wandering around the place. But in a few more steps she called his name, catching up with him.

“Did you talk to that guy? What are they doing?”

Still a little unnerved by the exchange, Nolo told her, “I’m not sure. That guy doesn’t talk too well.”

“Those two give me the creeps.”

“Yeah …” And in a hushed voice added, “More than Mr. Ginunga does?” They were passing his blinded windows.

“…That’s a hard call.”

“Let’s go see Ray and Estella.”

Opening her door to them, Estella stood smiling, but grave. “We were just coming to you. We’ve arrived at a turning, my dears. I’m afraid … our danger is most urgent now. Now you must learn exactly what we face.”

“Let’s have some sherry,” called Ray from behind her.

The younger couple sighed, and went inside.

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Their elders spoke to them, gravely and at length. When they had done, all four sat silent, and the roar of the wind filled the room. Outside, the atmosphere was flirting with a gale.

When Adrienne finally found her voice, it came out so ragged and hollow it startled Nolo. “How far down is it?”

“Far,” said Ray. “Below the bedrock of this promontory. But farther down the way is … paved. The strength we will need to go down there will be in our spines, not our legs.”

“It helps—” Nolo had to clear his throat. “It helps, a little, that we have no choice.”

A measured knocking on the door. Its resonance was strange for so polite a tap. Ray stood up. “Say nothing. Do not cease to meet his eyes.” He opened the door. Mr. Ginunga did not quite come in—stood precisely within the doorframe. Indeed, centered as he was in that shallow plane, he seemed an almost two-dimensional being, and planar as he was, his image had a dire distinctness, as if he was some kind of taut seal rather than a man … as if the membrane of him might tear at any moment, and a feral darkness pour out from the fissure.

Mr. Ginunga delivered his pale smile to each of them in turn. His lens-swollen eyes were metamorphic as they moved, seemed different eyes for each face that they scanned …

“Forgive my knocking, good friends. Do you … have something for me?” The wind roared in his question’s after-echo. Nolo thought with awe that Ray must frame an answer to this terrible query. The way the word *have* gusted from Mr. Ginunga’s pallid lips. It seemed to say that *everything* they had belonged to him.

When Ray raised his voice in answer that act struck Nolo as pure courage. “I *do* have something,” Ray said. And indeed, within his hands’ prayerful clasp Nolo saw the edge of that carven stone. Ray lifted this clasped talisman up to the level of Mr. Ginunga’s eyes. “He Whom you know is with us.”

Their visitor's bloated gaze grew more mutable—the gulfs of his pupils seemed to simmer. And now something slender moved down along the center line of his pale face. A thin blade of seething blackness was growing longer as they watched, dividing his countenance.

It widened till it filled the outline of his face, *was* his face, this sizzling black that spumed and misted round its rim. This nothingness beamed forth a lethal gravity, and Nolo felt that should he loosen one fiber of his will, his whole being must be plucked like chaff into its gulf.

And then the open doorway stood empty. The room's light spilled out and faintly touched the heaving vegetation surrounding the Battery, all waving and shuddering in the freshening gale.

In bed, Nolo and Adrienne didn't try to talk. Words now seemed pointless things. Just lay embraced, trying to wrap each other in sleep. And at length, Adrienne's breathing grew slower, deeper in his arms, and Nolo lay holding her, and thinking of war.

All his life he'd been convinced that war, always and everywhere, even when inescapable, was a terrible mistake. Was convinced of it now.

But this … This was *the* war, the One War Eternal, the war in which all life, all light is always locked. This was Life's war against the freezing dark of the universe, against the Void.

Ginunga-gap. They'd sought this dire name on their computers when they came back home. *Ginunga-gap*. One of the old Norse giants that dismantle the earth at the End of Days … huge, assaultive Chaos and Old Night.

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Ray had told them it would begin at high noon, and they must make their descent before the sun touched the sea. The day was all glorious windy blue, broken cumulus cruising like galleons. The younger couple returned from town mid-morning, laden with the spelunkers' equipment they were going to need. They met Ray and Estella before the workers' dropcloth screen.

"You haven't yet truly *met* our helpers," Ray said. "Now you must see what they are. You must begin to accustom yourselves to the … denizens of the place we'll be going."

They passed around the screen. The mouth of the new-dug shaft yawned even larger, and the heap of spoil beside it was a broad hill now. The coveralls again lay crumpled and empty, but were now flung far out in the clearing, as if decisively discarded. They all sensed movement in the earth they stood on. Concussions and … a dragging friction, rising it seemed …

An indescribable mass erupted from the shaft. Its bulky skin was soil and broken stone and splintered timber, reminiscent of a caddisfly larva's cocoon of pond debris. This elongate, rubble-crusted mass lurched up onto the spoil-heap, flexed itself, and shed all at once the stone, soil, and timber that enveloped it.

What was revealed was a slick supple mass equal to an elephant's, but sinuous, and tapered at both ends like an immense slug. This creature whipped round and poured itself back down the shaft, the sun striking its viscid black flesh and revealing a bubbly texture within. Vanishing into the earth, it left behind a gust of ethereal stench, a vile fetor that the bright winds scoured away.

"Behold our *shoggoths*. The pair of them have merged to make a single tunneler of themselves. They are pure strength, pure will, and utterly tireless. But their work is great. We *must* be through, must be down there before the sun touches the sea. Because *he*, now, is going to start cutting his furrow in our world."

Nolo had climbed the great heap of spoil and was poking through it. Here, among the soil and broken rock, were fragments of stonework surely two centuries old, perhaps of the Old Battery far beneath. Here too were fragments of the more recent understructure, the Haven of Health … a shard of lintel … a piece of panelling carven in oak-leaves and acorns. He looked to Ray.

"Cutting his furrow …"

"Yes. Noon is at hand, and we must watch him begin his work. We have to face this horror at once, my friends, or we will not *dare* to do what we must do."

They moved in file, as if they had become a kind of platoon. Came out along the northern face of the Battery. They looked down along their promontory's flank, and Estella said quietly, "There he is."

Neighboring their eminence was a sandy cove. Mr. Ginunga was descending the bluff of this cove, headed down toward its little beach. They watched his descent of the bluff. Though this was of crumbled stone, and steep, yet that narrow black shape, face eclipsed by his hat's brim, stepped so easily down it that he seemed as weightless as a shadow.

He walked straight across the sand—did his tread mark it at all?—till he stood at the fringe of the sea. His figure, though small, was sharply distinct, and his garb was of the densest black they'd ever seen.

And suddenly he collapsed. His black coat and hat fluttered empty down to the sand. From these heaped garments, a little black runnel sprouted, cutting a fine black line across the sand, and into the in-rushing foam.

And as the sea came boiling in on the runnel, its rush divided along that slender black axis, forming two little liquid walls to either side of it—forming them still as the wave paused, and then streamed back into the sea.

"Look at the sun," Adrienne said. It was halfway down from the zenith, growing oranger already.

Estella said, "We must go back to the shaft and stand ready." As they returned to the excavation, Nolo and Adrienne traded a glance of fear at the minor magic Mr. Ginunga had just worked. They knew what it was the beginning of.

One hour, two hours, they watched the shoggoth's labors. Eruptions of subterranean flesh, its shedding, the monster's plunge for ever deeper earth-meat. Nolo and Adrienne had learned that it was no more than a mighty tool, and the power by which Ray and Estella wielded it came from a vastly mightier monster who lay deep beneath them. And they had learned as well that this Being—immune to their race's annihilation—might view Ginunga's work with indifference, and when at length they laid their petition before It, might prove to be no ally at all …

"Oh God!" cried Adrienne, pointing. The sun was not three diameters above the horizon. She took a stride away, stopped, and looked back. "I have to take another look."

"Yes," said Estella. "Face it. *Know* our enemy! We'll call you if our time here comes."

Nolo went with her, the wind rising against them as they trudged seaward, beginning to come onshore in gale-force gusts, but what truly rocked them was what they beheld when they reached the cove, the spinal punch of what they saw—a terrifying cleavage now thrust a quarter mile into the sea. A hundred feet across was its knife-sharp gulf, the water that flanked it shivering in two perfect vertical walls above the utter black that thrust between. The wind-roused ocean rolled ashore, its rhythm undisturbed to either side, save for this slice where it *was not*.

"Come back!" they heard. "The time is now!" They staggered in their return, the terror of the descent they faced dwarfed by the terror they had just turned their backs upon.

Estella and Ray were strapping on gear, and the younger couple followed suit—headlamps, clip-lights on their clothes, gloves. “The shoggoths,” Ray said, “hang behind us, to hold the shaft open, in case the shifting earth should close it. The sun is almost setting. Down now! Underground!” Ray went first, and Nolo took the rear.

Their constellated lights picked out a pointilist sketch of the crooked sinus they descended. Thirty feet down they began to feel slow concussions through the promontory’s bones. The wind-roused surf was thundering on the shore …

The passage angled and steepened, their hands worked as hard as their feet now. Nolo gripped the broken shoulder of a half-sunk statue … deeper, the rusted flank of what might have been buried ordnance. Impacting surf sent ever stronger tremors until, quite soon, they had sunk below the surf-line. Here they felt a vaster pressure, the wide sea’s restless encumbrance of the continental shelf, and strange echoes now came worming up to meet their descent, rumors of some great emptiness below …

Descending fault lines of clean stone now, the passage for a while grew frighteningly tight … then leveled, broadened, toward … an aperture. A ragged polygon of empty air, faintly glowing greenish blue.

“Slow now,” said Ray. “Slow to the edge.”

They stood looking down from a rupture in a great, bizarrely faceted dome of masonry. It roofed a vast pillared plaza far below, and they could see that from that plaza’s circumference black-mouthed adits branched into the continental bedrock.

From their aperture, the collapsed roof’s fall of debris had formed a perilously steep ramp down to the plaza. They went down singly, widely spaced. Very gingerly were their grapplings down this shifty rubble, which rattled and clattered, breeding echoes that filled the vast dome, while at the same time the subterrene silence was restless, and rumors of its own seemed to murmur from the tunnels that branched from its rim. Was it movement? Was it some alien utterance, deep in those shafts?

A dais of rough stone was centered on the plaza, not quite high enough to be called an altar. Its surface was blackly encrusted. Remains of fire? But disturbingly, that black encrustation spilled down the flanks of the dais in a pattern of liquid overflow.

“Lend me your shoulder, Nolo.” Ray again struck Nolo as recklessly brave, to raise his voice in this great murmurous tomb. He clambered onto

the platform. Soles crackling as he trod that crust, he laid on the dais' center his carven stone. "Draw back," he said, jumping down. They backed into a semicircle twenty feet from the scabbed platform. "Face our Messenger. He is Tsathoggua. He is our emissary to the Eldest One, who will either save us, or allow our world to end. Do not turn away."

A strange noise began to be audible. Had they not been so massively roofed, it would have seemed rainfall that they heard, a clustered spattering whose source they could not see. Then, dull glitters from the dais identified it: a crackling was spreading across that platform's black encrustation. It flexed and gathered, its overflows peeling up from the stone—was a tortured fabric of movement. Its uneven skirts rose and interfolded into a ragged black calyx some fifteen feet high that writhed and worked and laced itself together into a broader, squatter shape.

Great back-jutting knees, short forelegs hugely clawed emerged from this coalescence, a wide and sinewy back, and last, the oblate moon of a toad's head, turret-eyed. Last to appear were those eyes—huge eyes, black ice eternal.

Nolo's backbone was cold fire steadily flaming. He found Adrienne's eyes, and saw in them the same.

Black radiance ensphered this monster. It lifted its neckless visage, and seemed to harken. Cocked its gaze, as brute alarm began to awake in the shiftings of its mighty legs. Cocked its gaze anew and seemed to study that which it could not believe.

"Stand fast," Ray said. "It has to go much deeper yet to reach our Ally."

"Stand and witness," Estella said. "That's our duty here. To *know*."

The batrachian giant sprang from the dais and seized its corner in claws that pierced the stone. What Nolo watched recalled to him what the big 'dozers did, in his days working construction. The monster wrenched the low-slung monolith straight out of the floor and hurled it thundering aside.

The underlying masonry it next attacked, splintering pavement stone to rubble. The great domed plaza brimmed with the brutal echoes, while the deeper the monster dug, the louder grew other echoes, *underlying* echoes of stone falling away *beneath* the deep pavement on which they stood. And long before it was revealed to them, the onlookers knew that a far deeper shaft plunged down beneath this plaza.

The monster's onslaught wrought a broad collapse, and tumbling masonry dwindled into a dim crooked deep of crude archaic stone. Down this far

profounder shaft of antiquity, the huge creature plunged.

"Now," Ray said, when he had found his voice, "we must get to the surface as fast as we can. For what's coming. If the Eldest One moves to help us, we dare not be this far underground. We dare not be underground *at all*."

Up the steep, unstable debris-ramp, their going must be unbearably slow, and long before they reached the rupture in the dome a reverberation welled from the deep shaft down which their mosntrous messenger had gone. A slow, vast *stirring* could be felt far, far below the plaza …

In the lip of the aperture they gathered. They had to hear it in spite of terror: the echoes of a deep intelligence, gravely murmuring.

Up the angling tunnel they clambered, desperate to be under sky again, their lamp-beams weaving in the gloom what seemed to be the webwork of a frantic spider scrambling its way up out of the abyss.

They emerged under the night sky with a near-full moon well risen, and a great gale of wind roaring. But there was something profoundly wrong about this storm of wind—for it sounded to be a strangely *divided* gale. Here the rush of the atmosphere tugged their hair to the roots, while a simultaneous tumult raged at a slight distance north of them. If this was all one storm … there was a blank zone in its mighty voice.

They ran to the rim of the promontory and, reaching it, felt within the wind's assault the crawling of their scalps.

A chasm of black, a quarter-mile across, split the sea right out to the horizon. The moonlight lavishly bathed this colossal wound. Their four minds had to yield a kind of reverence to a cataclysm so complete. Surreally gorgeous it was, for the sea was as cleanly cloven as stonework, two perfect walls of water, growing—a ways offshore—near a thousand feet high, and shimmering with moonlit life all uninterrupted. Silver fish-schools constellated the sundered deeps, great kelp-forests undulated in cross-section, a pod of whales hung just beneath the swell and seemed to doze, though they were such near neighbors to a yawning black where lay no sea-floor, no *planet* below, but Void unending.

The gale tore Ray's words, as if he shouted them across a canyon. "Light … is *not!* All … is *not!* It is … *Ginungagap!*"

The moon-drenched beach below was cloven like the sea, but only to the point where Mr. Ginunga had stood this afternoon. Landwards of this point

all was intact, sand and shore arced unbroken northwards, gale-blown but enduring.

But just then, directly beneath them—deep in the promontory's very root, as it seemed—they felt something stir. Not precisely a movement—more like an awareness. A sentience had awakened in the earth.

All their bodies in this moment felt like single flames to them—blades of naked energy, of awe, flickering so tenuously between this brute Void devouring the sea, and this Titan waking in the continent.

As if in *answer* to that deep awakening, the black gulf broadened, and its blackness fumed up like steam from a cauldron, and within this inky crest it raised, the Atmosphere was not, nor did any of the wide-flung moonlight fall there, but all was utter black.

Earthquake shook them, a stir of deep brute force which they knew was no part of this mute, yawning nullity, but rather an answer to it. Nolo seized Adrienne in his embrace, but it seemed no antidote at all for their annihilation. The gale tore at them as if to undress them of hair, of their skin itself, and great slow bubbles of gravity welled up their legs.

And within the tempest, Nolo remembered Ray's words last night.

"It may be that our Ally's strength could cross that void without surrendering to its nullity. Without ceasing to be …" And having said that, Ray had added, in a wondering tone, "Do you two realize that we have occupied our post of vigilance, wherever in the world it took us, for more than thirty years? And *generations* before us have done likewise, but to us it has been given to discharge our trust and confront the apocalypse. And at the same time it has been given us, near the end of our watch, which is the end of our lives, to find our successors, and to meet at last our dearest friends."

To find our successors. Within the holocaust, these words kindled along Nolo's spine, because they seemed to tell him that the cataclysm engulfing them now was not the only one that threatened to assail this fragile colossus, their planet. That generations more, beyond his and Adrienne's watch, must in their turn keep watch. He remembered the Norse, who saw a *band* of titans engaged in Earth's final dismantling …

Then, halfway out to the horizon, from below the southern wall of ocean, a pale something *entered* Ginungagap, thrust into its absolute annihilation, and yet was not annihilated—a pale, snaky mass, sharp-tipped, but thickening as it sprouted. It was … a tentacle, one of colossal size, to loom so large, so far out in the cloven sea. It seemed to freeze as it sprouted, grow

frosty and cracked, yet there was a monstrous energy in its growth that shed the fragments of its frozen substance and swell with might and mass renewed—and a *second* one sprouted beside it, followed by another.

Moments later there were eight in all branching into the void, piercing Nullity like the great roots of Life itself, and writhing, worming, reached across the world's vast wound. Titanic they were by the end of their crossing, looking like planetary sinew seeking purchase on itself to bind its breach, and an earthquake that dwarfed the first one marked their piercing of the chasm's farther wall.

All four were flung down, and there was no need of Ray's shrieked words: "Hug the dirt!"

The wide, moon-washed coast groaned and shuddered. The four witnesses lifted their stunned eyes. The tentacles bunched with power and contracted. The black gulf narrowed, narrowed, and Ginunga's fuming comb towered higher, higher, a thinning blade of blackness cleaving the stars.

"Hold on!" they all howled at once, but this they could not do in the moment of the wound's titanic closure, for with its impact their bodies bounced and danced like surf-struck flotsam. Long past the earth's great after-shudder, they lay trembling, hugging their delivered world …

"Look up!" Adrienne cried. A long blade of blackness rose through the moonlight but untouched by it, and narrowed as it rose, narrowed, dwindled, and vanished toward the stars.

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COPPING SQUID

Ricky Deuce, twenty-eight and three years sober, was the night clerk at Mahmoud's Mom and Pop Market. He was a small, leanly muscled guy, and as he sat there, the darkness outside deepening toward midnight, his tight little Irish face looked pleased with where he was. Behind Ricky on his stool, the whole wall was bottles of every kind of Hard known to man.

This job was easy money—a sit-down after his day forklifting at the warehouse. He already owned an awesomely restored '64 Mustang and had near 10K saved, and by rights he ought to be casting around for where he might take off to next. But the fact was, he got a kick out of clerking here till two A.M. each night.

A kick that was not powder nor pill nor smoke nor booze, that was not needing any of them, especially not booze, which could shine and glint in its bottles and surround him all night long, and he not give a shit. He never got tired of sitting here immune, savoring the unadorned adventure of being alive.

Not that the job lacked irritants. There were obnoxious clients, and these preponderated toward the deep of night.

Ricky thought he heard one even now.

Single cars shushed past outside, long silences falling between, and a scuffy tread advanced along the sidewalk. A purposeful tread that nonetheless staggered now and then. It reminded Ricky that he was It, the only island of comfort and light for a half a mile in all directions, in a big city, in the dead of night.

Then, there in Mahmoud's Mom and Pop Market's entryway, stood a big gaunt black guy. Youngish, but with a strange, outdated look, his hair growing weedily out toward a 'fro. His torso and half his legs were engulfed in an oversize nylon athletic jacket that looked as if it might have slept in an alley or two, and which revealed the chest of a dark T-shirt that said something-indecipherable RULES. The man had a drugged look, but he also had wide-arched, inquiring brows. His glossy black eyes checked you out, as if maybe the real him was somewhere back in there, smarter than he looked.

But then, as he lurched inside the store and into the light, he just looked drunk.

“Evening,” Ricky said, smiling. He always opened by giving all his clientele the benefit of the doubt.

The man came and planted his hands of the counter, not aggressively, it seemed, but in the manner of someone tipsily presenting a formal proposition.

“Hi. I’m Andre. I need your money, man.”

Ricky couldn’t help laughing. “What a coincidence! So do I!”

“OK, Bro,” Andre said calmly, agreeably. As if he were shaping a counter-proposal, he straightened and stepped back from the counter. “Then I’ma cut your fuckin ass to *ribbons* till you *give* me your fuckin money!”

The odd picture this plan of action presented almost made Ricky laugh again, but then the guy whipped out and flipped open—with great expertise—a very large gravity knife, which he then swept around by way of threat, though still out of striking range. Ricky was so startled that he half fell off his stool.

Getting his legs under him, furious at having been galvanized like that, Ricky shrieked, “A knife? You’re gonna to rob me with a fucking *knife?* I’ve got a fucking knife!”

And he unpocketed his lock-back Buck knife and snapped it open. All this while he found himself once again trying to decipher the big, uncouthly lettered word on the guy’s T-shirt above the word RULES.

Andre didn’t seem drunk at all now. He swept a slash over the counter at Ricky’s head, which Ricky had to recoil from right smartly.

“You shit! You do that again and I’m gonna slice your—”

Here came the gravity knife again, as quick as a shark, and, snapping his head back out of the way, Ricky counter-slashed at the sweeping arm and felt the rubbery tug of flesh unzipped by the tip of his Buck’s steel.

Andre abruptly stepped back and relaxed. He put his knife away and held up his arm. It had a nice bloody slash across the inner forearm. He stood there letting it bleed for Ricky. Ricky had seen himself and others bleed, but not a black man. On black skin, he found, blood looked more opulent, a richer red, and so did the meat underneath the skin. That cut would take at least a dozen stitches. They both watched the blood soak the elastic cuff of Andre’s jacket.

“So here’s what it is,” said Andre, and dipped his free hand in the jacket and pulled out a teensy, elegant little silver cellphone. “Ima call the oinkers and say I need an ambulance because this mad whacked white shrimp—that’s you—slashed me when I just axed him for some spare change, and then Ima ditch the shit outta this knife before they show up, and it won’t matter if they believe me or not, when they see me bleedin like this they gonna take us both down for questioning and statements. How’s your rap sheet, Chief, hey? So look. Just give me a little money and I’m totally outta your face. It don’t have to be much. Ten dollars would do it!”

This took Ricky aback. “Ten dollars? You make me cut you for ten dollars?”

“You wanna give me a hundred, give me a hundred! Ten’s all you gotta give me—and a ride. A short ride, over to the Hood.”

“You want money and a ride! You think I’m outta my mind? You wanna ride to your connection to score, and when we get there you’re gonna try an get more money out of me. And that’s the *best*-case scenario.” Ricky was dismayed to hear a hint of negotiation in his own words. It was true, he’d had a number of contacts with the San Francisco Police Department, as the result of alcohol-enhanced conflicts here and there. But also, he felt intrigued by the guy. Something fascinating burned in this Andre whack. Intensity came off him in waves, along with his faint scent of street-funk. The man was consumed by a passion. In the deformed letters on his T-shirt, Ricky thought he could make out a T_H_U.

“What could I be coppin for ten bucks?” crowed Andre. “I’m not out to harm you! This just has to do with *me*. See, it’s *required*. I have to get these two things from someone else, the money and the ride.”

“Explain that. Explain why you *have* to get these two things from someone else.”

Andre didn’t answer for a moment. He stared and stared, not exactly at Ricky, but at something he seemed to see in Ricky. He seemed to be weighing this thing he detected. He had eyes like black opals, and strange slow thoughts seemed to move within their shiny hemispheres …

“The reason is,” he said at last, “that’s the *procedure*. There are these particular rules for seeing the one I want to see.”

“And who is that?”

“I can’t tell you. I’m not allowed.”

It was almost time to close up anyway. Ricky became aware of a powerful tug of curiosity, and aware of the fact that Andre saw it in his eyes. This put Ricky's back up.

"No. You gotta give me something. You gotta tell me at least—"

"Thassit! Fuck you!" And Andre flipped open the cellphone. His big spatulate fingertips made quick dainty movements on the minute keys. Ricky heard the bleep, minuscule but crystal clear, of the digits, and then a micro-voice saying, "Nine One One Emergency."

"I been stabbed by a punk in a liquor store! I been stabbed!"

Ricky violently shook his head and held up his hands in surrender. With a bleep, Andre clicked off. "Believe me! You're not makin a mistake. It's something I can't talk about, but you can see it. You can see it yourself. But the thing is, it's got to be now. We can't hem an haw. And Ima tell you now, now that you're in, that there's something in it for you, something good as gold. Trust me, you'll see. Help me with this knot," he said, pulling a surprisingly clean-looking handkerchief from his jacket pocket. He folded it —rather expertly, Ricky thought—into a bandage. Ricky wrapped it round the wound and tied the ends in a neat, tight square-knot, feeling as his fingers pressed against flesh that he was forming a bond with this whack by stanching his blood. He was accepting a dangerous complicity with his whack aims, whatever they might be …

Bandaged, Andre held out his hand. Ricky put a ten in it.

"Thanks," said Andre. "So. Where's your ride?"

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The blue Mustang boomed down Sixteenth through the Mission. All the signals were on blink. Here and there under the streetlights there was a wino or two, or someone walking fast, shoulders hunched against the emptiness, but mostly the Mustang rolled through pure naked City, a vacant concrete stage.

Ricky liked driving around at this hour, and often did it on his own for fun. When he was a kid, he'd always felt sorcery in the midnight streets, in the mosaic of their lights, and he'd never lost the sense of unearthly shapes stirring beneath their web, stirring till they almost cohered, as the stars did for the ancients into constellations. Tonight, with mad, bleeding Andre riding shotgun, the lights glittered wilder possibilities, and a sinister grandeur seemed to lurk in them.

They passed under the freeway, and down to the Bayside, hanging south on Third. After long blocks of big blank buildings, Third took a snaky turn, and they were rolling through the Hood.

Pawnshops and thrift stores and liquor stores. A whiff of Mad Dog hung over it, Mad Dog with every other drug laced through it. The Hood was lit, was like a long jewel. The signals were working here.

The signals stretched out of sight ahead, like a python with scales of red and green, their radiance haloed in a light fog that was drifting in off the Bay. And people were out, little knots of them near the corners. They formed isolated clots of gaudy life, like tidepools, all of them dressed in baggy clothes of bright-colored nylon, paneled and logo-ed with surreal pastels under the emerald-and-ruby signal glare. And as they stood and talked together, they moved in a way both fitful and languid, like sealife bannering in a restless sea.

The signals changed in pattern to a slow tidal rhythm. It seemed a rhythm meant to accommodate rush-hour traffic. You got a green for two blocks max, and then you got a red. A long, long red. Ricky's blue Mustang was almost the only car on the road in this phantom rush-hour, creeping down the long bright python two blocks at a time and then idling, idling interminably, while the sealife on the corners seemed astir with interest and attention.

Ricky had no qualms about running red lights on deserted streets, but here it seemed dangerous, a declaration of unease.

"Fuck this!" he said at their fourth red light, slipping the brake and rolling forward. At a stroll though, under twenty. The Mustang lounged along, taking green and red alike, as if upon a scenic country road. The bright languid people on the corners threw laughter at them now, a shout or two, and it seemed as if the whole great submarine python stirred to quicker currents. Ricky felt a ripple of hallucination and saw here, for just a moment, a vast inked mural, the ink not dry, themselves and all around them still half-liquid entities billowing in an aqueous universe …

Out of nowhere, for the first time in three years, Ricky had the thought that he would like a drink. He was amazed at this thought. He was frightened. Then he was angry.

"I'm not drivin much farther, Andre. Spit out where we're going, and it better be nearby, or you can call 911 and I'll take my chances. I'll bet you got a longer past with the SFPD than I do."

“*Damn* you! Whip in here, then.”

This cross-street was mostly houses—some abandoned—with a liquor store on the next corner and a lot of sealife lounging out in front of it. “Pull up into some light where you can *see* this.”

They idled at the curb. The people on the main drag were two-thirds of a block behind them, the liquor store tidepool much closer ahead of them. Andre leaned his fanatic’s face close to Ricky. The intensity of the man was an almost tactile experience; Ricky seemed to feel the muffled crackling of his will through the inches of air that separated them. “Here,” hissed Andre. “I’m gonna give you *this*, just to drive me another coupla miles up into these hills. Look at it. Count it. Take it.” He shoved a thick roll of bills into Ricky’s ribs.

It was in twenties and fifties and hundreds … It was over five thousand dollars.

“You’re … you’re batshit, Andre! You make me cut you to get ten bucks, and now you—”

“Just listen.” Some people from the liquor-store tide pool were drifting their way, and Ricky saw similar movement from Third Street in his rearview mirror. “What I needed,” said Andre, “was money that blood was spilt for—it didn’t matter how much blood, it didn’t matter how much money. Your ten-spot? It’s worth that much to me there in your hand. Your ten-spot and another couple miles in your car.”

The locals were flowing closer to the Mustang at both ends. Ricky fingered the money. The gist of it was, he decided, that if he didn’t follow this waking dream to its end, he would never forgive himself. “OK,” he said.

“Another couple miles in your car,” said Andre, “an one more thing. You gotta come in.”

“You fuck! You shit! Where does it *end* with you? You just keep—”

“You come in, you watch me connect, and you go out again, scot-free, no harm, no strings attached! I gotta bring blood money, and I gotta bring a *witness*. I lied to you. It wasn’t the ride I needed. It was a *witness*.”

A huge shape in lavender running-sweats, and a gaunt one wearing a lime-green jumpsuit, stood beside the Mustang, smiling and making roll-down-the-window gestures. Behind the car, shapes from the main drag were moving laterally out into the street to come up to the driver’s side …

But in that poised moment what Ricky saw most vividly was Andre's face, his taut narrow face within its weedy 'fro. This man was in the visionary's trance. His eyes, his soul were locked upon something that filled him with awe. What he pursued had nothing to do with Ricky nor with anything Ricky could imagine, and Ricky wanted to know what that thing was.

Andre said, "Ima show you—what's your name again?"

"Ricky."

"Ima show you, Richie, the power and the glory. They are right here *among* you, man, an you don't even see it! Hell, even these fools out here can *see* it!"

The Mustang was surrounded now. From behind it sprouted shapes in crimson hoods, with fists bulging inside gold velvet jacket pockets. Up to Ricky's door (its window already open, his elbow thrust out, and 5K in cash on his lap) stepped two men with thundercloud hair, wearing shades, their cheeks and brows all whorled with Maori tatooing like ink-black flames. A trio of gaudy nylon scarecrows leaned on his hood, conferring, the side-thrust bills of their caps switching like blades. But Ricky also noted that all this audience, every one of them, had eyes strictly for Andre sitting there at his side. Ricky was free to scan all those exotic, piratical faces as though he were invisible …

All their eyes were grave. They showed awe, and they showed loathing too, as if they abhorred something Andre had done but, just as piercingly, longed for his nerve to do it. Ricky realized he had embarked on a longer journey than he'd thought.

Andre scanned all these buccaneer faces, his fellow mariners of the Hood. A remote little grin was hanging slantwise across his jaw. "Check this out, Rocky," he growled, "an learn from these fools. Learn their *awe*, man, cause what I'ma show you, up in those hills, is *awe*."

He shouldered his door open and thrust himself up onto the sidewalk. He towered just as tall as the giant in lavender sweats, but he was narrow as a reed. Yet his voice fairly boomed:

"Yo! Alla you! Listen up! Looka here! Looka me! You all wanna see something? Wanna see something *about* something besides *shit!?* See something *real*, just for a *change?* See the ice-cold, spine-crawlin, hair-stirrin *truth?* Looka here! Looka here, at the power! Looka here! Looka here, at the glory!"

Ricky scanned all the dark faces that ringed them round, and every eye was locked upon that wild gaunt man in his rapture, who now, with a powerful shrug, shouldered off his nylon jacket. It flopped down on the sidewalk with a slither and a sigh, and lay there on the concrete like a sloughed cocoon. He stretched the fabric of his T-shirt, displaying it to every locked-on eye.

Ricky's angle was still too acute to let him decipher exactly who it was who "ruled." But all these encircling faces, *they* seemed to know. They shared a vision of awe and terror and … something like hope. A frosty hope, endlessly remote … but hope. Ricky realized that there prevailed on these mean streets a consensus of vision. He clearly saw that all these eyes had seen, and understood, a catastrophic spectacle beyond his own imagining.

Andre barked, hoarse and brutish as a sea-lion, "Jus *look* at me here! I have gone up to see Him, and I have looked through His eyes, and I have *been* where He *is*, time without end! An I'm here to tell you, all you dearly beloved mongrel dogs of mine, I'm here to tell you that it's *consumed* me! My flesh, and my time, have been blown off my bones, by the searing winds of His breath! I'm not far off now from eternity! Not far off from infinity now!"

The raving seer then hiked up his T-shirt to his chest. What Ricky, from behind, saw there was like a blow to his own chest, an impact of terror and dizziness, for Andre's thorax on its left side was normal, gauntly fleshed and sinewed, but along its right side, his spine was denuded bone, and midriff was there none, and just below his hoisted shirt-hem, a lathed bracket looped down: a fleshless rib, as clean and bare as sculpture …

His rapt audience recoiled like a single person, some lifting their arms convulsively, as in a reflex of self-protection, or acclaim …

Ricky dropped the Mustang into gear and launched it from the curb, but in that selfsame instant Andre dropped into his seat again and slammed his door, and so he was snatched deftly away, as if he were a prize that Ricky treasured and not a horror that Ricky had been trying to flee.

Moonsilvered, lightless blocks floated past, yet Ricky never took his eyes from the gaunt shape whose T-shirt he could now, uncomprehending, read:

Somehow he drove, and, shortly, pulled again to a more deserted curb, and killed the engine. On this block, a sole dim streetlight shone. Half the houses were doorless, windowless …

He sat with only silence between himself and a man who had, at the least, submitted to a grave surgical mutilation in the service of his deity. Ricky looked into Andre's eyes.

That was the first challenge, to establish that he dared to look into Andre's eyes—and he found that he did dare.

"For all you've lost," Ricky said, queasily referencing the gruesome marvel, "… you seem very alive."

"I'm more alive than you will ever be, and when I'm all consumed, I'll be far *more* alive, and I will live forever!"

Ricky fingered the little bale of cash in his hand. "If you want me to go on, you have to tell me this. *Why* do you have to have a witness?"

"Because the One I'm gonna see wants someone new to see Him. He doesn't wanna know you. He wants *you* to know *Him*." In the darkness, Andre's polished eyes seemed to burn with this thing that he knew and Ricky did not.

"He wants me to know him. And then?"

"And then it's up to you. To walk away, or to see him like I do."

"And how is that? How do you see him?"

"All the way."

Ricky's hand absently stroked the gearshift knob. "The choice is absolutely mine?"

"Your will is your own! Only your knowledge will be changed!"

Ricky slipped the Mustang into gear, and once more the blue beast growled onward. "Take a right here," purred Andre. "We going up to the top of the hills."

It was the longest "couple miles" that Ricky had ever driven. The road poured down past the Mustang like time itself, a slow stream of old and older houses, on steepening blocks gapped by vacant lots, or by derelict cottages whose windows and doors were coffined in grafittied plywood.

They began to wind, and a rising sense of peril woke in Ricky. He was charging up into the sinister unknown! There was just too much missing from this man's body! You couldn't lose all that and still walk around, still fight with knives … could you?

But you could. Just look at him.

The houses thinned out even more, big old trees half shrouding them. Dead cars slept under drifts of leaves, and dim bedroom lights showed life just barely hanging on, here in the hungry heights.

As they mounted this shoulder of the hills, Ricky saw glimpses of other ridges to the right and left, rooftop-and-tree-encrusted like this one. All these crestlines converged toward the same summit, and when Ricky looked behind, it seemed that these ridges poured down like a spill of titanic tentacles. They plunged far below into a thick, surprisingly deep fog that drowned and dimmed the jeweled python of the Hood.

Near the summit, their road entered a deepening gully. At the apex stood a municipal watertank, the dull gloss of its squat cylinder half sunk in trees and houses.

“We goin to that house there right upside the tank. See that big gray roof pokin from the trees? The driveway goes down through the trees, it’s steep an dark. Just roll down slow and easy, kill the engine, an let me get out first an talk to her.”

“Her?”

Andre didn’t answer. The road briefly crested before plunging, and Ricky had a last glimpse below of the tentacular hills rooted in the fogbank—and rooted beyond that, he imagined, more deeply still into the black floor of the Bay, as if the tentacles rummaged there for their deep-sunk food …

“Right there,” said Andre, pointing ahead. “See the gap in the bushes?”

The Mustang crept muttering down the dark leafy tunnel, just as a wind rose, rattling dry oak foliage all around them.

A dim grotto of grassy ground opened below. There was a squat house on it, so dark it was almost a shadow-house. It showed one dim yellow light on the floor of its porch. A lantern, it looked like. A large dark shape loomed on one side of this lantern, and a smaller dark shape lay on the other.

Ricky cut his engine. Andre drew a long, slow breath and got out. Leaves whispered in the silence. Andre’s feet crackled across the yard. Ricky could hear the creak of his weight on the porch-steps as he climbed them, halfway up to the two dark shapes and their dim shared light. And Ricky could also hear … a growly breathing, wasn’t it? Yes … a slow, phlegmy purr of big lungs.

Andre’s voice was a new one to Ricky: low and implacable. “I’m back again, Mamma Hagg. I got the toll. I got the witness.” Then he looked back and said, “Stand on out here … what’s your name again?”

Ricky got out. How dangerous it suddenly seemed to declare himself in this silence, this place! Well, shit. He was here. He might as well say who he was. Loudly: “Ricky Deuce.”

When he'd said it, he found his eyes could suddenly decipher the smaller dark shape by the lantern: it was a seated black dog, a big one, with the hint of aging frost on his lower jaw, and with his red tongue hanging and gently pulsing by that frosted jaw. The dog was looking steadily back at him, its tongue a bright spoon of greedy tissue scooping up the taste of the night ….

It was not the brute's breathing Ricky had heard. It was Momma Hagg's, her voice deep now from the vault of her cavelike lungs:

"Then show the toll, fool."

Andre bent slightly to hold something toward the hound. And above his bent back, the woman in her turn became visible to Ricky. Within a briar-patch of dreads as pale as mushrooms, her monolithic black face melted in its age, her eyes two tarpools in this terrain of gnarled ebony. The shadowy bulk of her body eclipsed the mighty chair she sat in, though its armrests jutted into view, dark wood intricately carven into the coils and claws and thews of two heraldic monsters. Ricky couldn't make out what they were, but they seemed to snarl beneath the fingers of Momma Hagg's immense hands.

The dog's tongue was licking what Andre held up to it—Ricky's tenspot. The mastiff sniffed and sniffed, then snorted, and licked the bill again, and licked his chops.

"Come on up," said Momma. "The two of you." The big woman's voice had a strange kind of pull to it. Like surf at your legs, its growl dragged you toward her. Ricky approached. Andre mounted to the porch, and Ricky climbed after him. He had the sensation with each step up that he entered a bigger and emptier kind of space. When he stood on the porch, Momma Hagg seemed farther off than he had expected. From her distance wafted the smell of her—an ashen scent like the drenched coals of a bonfire that had included flesh and bones in its fuel. The dog rose.

The porch took too long to cross as they followed the hound. His bright tongue lolling like a casually held torch, with just one back-glance of one crimson eye, the brute led them through a wide, doorless doorframe, and into a high dark interior that gusted out dank salty breath in their faces.

A cold gray light leaked in here, as if the fog that had swallowed the Hood had now climbed the hills, and its glow was seeping into this gaunt house. They trod a rambling, unpartitioned space, the interior all wall-less, while the outer walls were irregularly recessed in alcoves, nooks, and grottos. In some of these stood furniture, oddly forlorn, bulky antique

pieces—an armchair, a settee, an escritoire crusted with ancient papers. These stranded little settings—like fossils of foregone transactions whose participants had blown to dust long since—seemed to mark the passage of generations through this rambling gloom.

Ricky had the disorienting sense they had been trekking for a long, long time. He realized that the stranded furniture had a delicately furred and crusted profile in the gray light, like tidepool rocks, and a cold tidal scent touched his nostrils. Realized too, that here and there in those recesses there were windows. Beyond their panes lay a different shade of darkness, where weedy and barnacled shadows stirred, glinting wetly …

And throughout this shadowy passage, Ricky noted, on every stretch of wall he could discern, wooden wainscotting densely carven. The misty glow put a sheen on the sinuous saliences of this dark chiselwork, which seemed to depict bulbous, serpentine knots of tail and claw and thew—or perhaps woven Cephalopodia, braided greedy tentacles, and writhing prey in ragged beaks ….

But now the walls had narrowed in, and here were stairs, and up these steep, worn stairs the hound, not pausing, led them. The air of this stairwell was slightly dizzying. The labor of the black beast climbing before them seemed to pull the two men after, as if the beast drew them in an executioner’s tumbril. They were lifted, Ricky suddenly felt, by a might far greater than theirs, and Andre, ahead of him, seemed to shiver and quake in the flux of that dire energy. It gave Ricky the sensation of walking in Andre’s lee and being sheltered by his body from a terror that streamed around him like a solar wind.

From the head of the stairs, a great mouldy vacancy breathed down on them. They emerged into what seemed a simpler and far older structure. High-beamed ceiling, carven walls … it was no more than a grand passage ending at a high dark archway. The floor planks faintly drummed, as if this was a bridgeway, unfoundationed. That great black arch ahead … it was inset in a wall that bowed. A metallic wall.

“The tank!” said Ricky. It jumped out of him. “That’s that big water tank!”

The Hound halted and turned. Andre too turned, gave him eyes of wild reproof, but the Hound, raising to Ricky his crimson eyes, gave him a red-tongued leer, gave him the glinty pupiled mockery of a knowing demon.

This look set the carven walls to seething, set the sculpted thews rippling, limbs lacing, beaks butchering, all brutally busy beneath their fur of dust …

The Hound turned again and led them on. Now they could smell the water in the great tank—an odor both metallic and marine—and the hound's breathing began to echo, to grow as cavernous as Mamma Hagg's had been. Within that archway was a blackness absolute, a darkness far more perfect than the gloom that housed them. As they closed with it, the hound's nails echoed as on a great oaken drum above a jungle wilderness. The beast dropped to its belly, lay panting, whining softly. The two men stood behind.

Within the portal, a huge glossy black surface confronted them, a great shield of glass, a mirror as big as a house. There they were in it: Ricky, Andre, the hound. The brightest feature of their tiny, distorted reflection was the bright red dot of the hound's tongue.

Andre paused for a few heartbeats only. Then he stepped through the arch, with an odd ceremonial straightness to his posture. He gestured, and Ricky followed him, seeing as he did so that the aperture was cut through a double metal wall that showed a cross-section of struts between.

They stood on a narrow balcony just within the tank, and felt a huge damp breath of the steel-clad lake below them, and gazed into the immense glass that was to afford them their Revelation of the Power and the Glory …

Andre stared some moments at his reflection, then turned to Ricky. "Now I tell you what it is … you say your name was Rocky?"

"Ricky."

"Ricky, now Ima tell you what it is. I came to see and be seen by Him. When He really sees *you*, you can see through *His* eyes, and you can live His mind."

"But what if I don't want to live his mind?"

"You can't! You didn't pay the toll! You'll *see* some shit, though! You'll see enough, you'll know that if you got any adventure in your soul, you got to *pay* that toll! But that's up to you! Now look, an learn!"

He faced the mirror again, and in a cracked voice he cried, "Iä! Iä! Iä fhtagn!"

And the mirror, ever so slightly, contracted, and the faintest circumference of white showed round its great rim, and encompassing that ring of pallor, something black and scaly like a sea-beast's hide crinkled into view … and Ricky realized that they stood before the pupil of an immense eye.

And Ricky found his feet were rooted, and he could not turn to flee.

And he beheld a dizzying mosaic of lights flashing to life within the mighty pupil. A grand midnight vision crystallized: the whole San Francisco Bay lay within the black orb, bordered by the whole bright ouroboros of coastal lights …

He and Andre gazed on the vista, on the Bridges' glittering spines transecting it, all their lengths corpuscled with fleeing lights red and white. The two men gazed on the panorama, and it drank their minds. Rooted, they inhabited its grandeur, even as it began a subtle distortion. The vista seemed tugged awry, torqued toward the very center of the giant's pupil. And within that grand, slow distortion, Ricky saw strange movements. Across the Bay Bridge, near its eastern end, the cargo cranes of West Oakland—tracked monsters, each on four mighty legs—raised and bowed their cabled booms in a dinosaurian salute—obeisance, or acclaim … while to their left, the giant tanks on Benecia's tarry hills, and the Richmond tanks too in the west, began a ponderous rotation on their bases, a slow spin like planets obeying the pupil's gathering vortex.

Andre cried out, to Ricky, or just to the world he was about to leave, "I see it all coming apart! In detail! Behold!"

This last word reverberated in a brazen basso far larger than the lean man's lungs could shape. And the knell of that voice awoke winds in the night, and the winds buffeted Ricky as though he hung in the night sky within the eye, and Ricky knew. He knew this being into whose view he'd come! Knew this monster was the king of a vast migration of titans across the eons of the countless Space-Times! Over the gale-swept universe they moved, these Great Old Ones. Across the cracked continents they trawled, they plundered! Worlds were the pastures that they grazed, and the broken bodies of whole races were the pavement that they trod!

It astonished him, the threshold to which this Andre, night-walking zealot, had brought him. He looked at Andre now, saw the man utterly alone at the brink of his apotheosis. How high he seemed to hang in the night winds! Look at the frailty of that skinny frame! The mad greed of his adventure!

Andre seemed to shudder, to gather himself. He looked back at Ricky. He looked as if he were seeing in Ricky some foreigner in a far, quaint land, some backward Innocent, unknowing of the very world he stood in.

“On squid, man,” he said, “… on squid, *Ricky*, you get big! All hell breaks loose in the back of your brain, and you can *hold* it, you can *contain* it! And then you get to watch Him *feed*. And now *you’ll* see. Just a little! Not too much! But you going to *know*.”

Andre turned and faced the eye. He gathered himself, gathered his voice for a great shout:

“Here’s my witness! Here I come!”

And he vaulted from the balcony, out into the pupil—impacted it for an instant, seemed to freeze in mid-leap as if he had struck glass—but, in the instant after, was within the vast inverted cone of light-starred night, and hung high, tiny but distinct, above the slowly twisting panorama of the great black Bay all shoaled and shored and spanned with light. That galactic metropolis, round its core of abyss, was—less slowly now—still contorting, twisting toward the center of the pupil …

And Ricky found that he too hung within it, he stood on the wide cold air in the night sky, he felt against his face the winds’ slow torque toward the the center of the Old One’s sight.

And now all hell, with relentless slow acceleration, broke loose. The City’s blazing architected crown began to discohere, brick fleeing brick in perfect pattern, in widening pattern, till they all became pointilist buildings snatched away in the whirlwind, and from the buildings all the people too like flung seed swirled up into the night, their evaporating arms raised as in horror, or salute, crying out their being from clouding faces that the black winds sucked to tatters …

He saw the great bridges braided with—and crumpling within—barnacle-crusted tentacles as thick as freeway tunnels, saw the freeways themselves—pillared rivers of light—unraveling, their traffic like red and white stars fleeing into the air, into the cyclone of the Great Old One’s attention.

And an inward vision was given to Ricky, simultaneous with this meteoric overview. For he also knew the Why of it. He knew the hunger of the nomad titans, their unappeasable will to consume each bright busy outpost they could find in the universal Black and Cold. Knew that many another world had fled, as this one fled, draining into the maw of the grim cold giants, each world’s collapsing roofs and walls bleeding a smoke of souls, all sucked like spume into the mossy curvature of His colossal jaws …

- - -

It was perfectly dark. It was almost silent, except for a rattle of leaves. The cold against his face had the wet bite of fog …

Ricky shook his head, and the dark grew imperfect. He put out his hand and touched rough wooden siding. He was alone on the porch, no lantern now, no armchair, no one else. Just dead leaves in crackly little drifts on the floorboards as—slowly and unsteadily—he started across them.

He had *seen* some shit. Stone cold sober, he had *seen*. And now the question was, who was he?

He crossed the leaf-starred grass, on legs that felt increasingly familiar. Yes … here was this Ricky-body that he knew, light and quick. And here was his Mustang, blown oak leaves chittering across its polished hood. And still the question was, who was he?

He was this car, for one thing, had worked long to buy it and then to perfect it. He got behind the wheel and fired it up, felt his perfect fit in this machine. Flawlessly it answered to his touch, and the blue beast purred up through the leaf-tunnel as the house—a doorless, glassless derelict—fell away behind him. But this Ricky Deuce … who was he now?

He emerged from the foliage and dove down the winding highway. There was the fog-banked Bay below, the jeweled snake of the Hood glinting within its gray wet shroud, and Ricky took the curves just like his old self, riding one of the hills' great tentacles down, down toward the sea they rooted in …

There was something Ricky had to do. Because in spite of his body, his nerves being his, he didn't *know* who he was now, had just had a big chunk torn out of him. And there was something terrible he had to do, to locate, by desperate means, the man he had lost, to find at least a piece of him he was sure of.

His hands and arms knew the way, it seemed. Diving down into the thicker fog, he smoothly threw the turns required … and slid up to the curb before the liquor store they'd parked near … when? A universe ago. Parked and jumped out.

Ricky was terrified of what he was going to do, and so he moved swiftly to have it done with, just nodding to his recent companions as he hastened into the store—nodding to the Maoris in shades, to the guys with the switchblade cap-bills, to the guys with the crimson hoods and the golden pockets. But rushed though he was, it struck him that they were all looking at him with a kind of fascination …

At the counter he said, “Fifth of Jack.” He didn’t even look to see what he peeled off his wad to pay for it, but there were a lot of twenties in his change. The Arab bagged him his bottle, his eyes fixed almost raptly on Ricky’s, so Ricky was moved to ask in simple curiosity, “Do I look strange?”

“No,” the man said, and then said something else, but Ricky had already turned, in haste to get outside where he could take a hit. Had the man said *no, not yet?*

Ricky got outside, cracked the cap, and hammered back a stiff, two-gurgle jolt.

He scarcely could wait to let it roll down and impact him. He felt the hot collision in his body’s center, the roil of potential energy glowing there, then poked down a long, three-gurgle chaser. Stood reeling inwardly, and outwardly showing some impact as well …

And there it was: a heat, a turmoil, a slight numbing. No more. No magic. No rising trumpets. No wheels of light … The half-pint of Jack he’d just downed had no marvel to show like the one he’d just seen.

And so Ricky knew that he was someone else now, someone he had not yet fully met.

“’Sup?” It was the immense guy in the lavender sweats. He had a solemn Toltec-statue face, but an incongruously merry little smile.

“’S happnin,” said Ricky. “Hey. You want this?”

“That Jack?”

“Take the rest. Keep it. Here’s the cap.”

“No thanks.” This to the cap. The man drank. As he chugged, he slanted Ricky an eye with something knowing, something *I thought so* in it. Ricky just stood watching him. He had no idea at all of what would come next in his life, and for the moment this bibulous giant was as interesting a thing as any to stand watching …

The man smacked his lips. “It ain’t the same, is it?” he grinned at Ricky, gesturing the bottle. “It just don’t matter any more. I mean, so I *understand*. I like the glow jus fine myself. But you … see, you widdat Andre. You’ve been a *witness*.”

“Yeah. I have. So … tell me what that means.”

“You the one could tell me. Alls I know is *I’d* never do it, and a whole lotta folks around here *they’d* never do it—but you didn’t know that, did you?”

“So tell me what it *means*.”

“It means what you make of it! And speakin of which, man, of what you might make of it, I wanna show you something right now. May I?”

“Sure. Show me.”

“Let’s step round here to the side of the building … just round here …” Now they stood in the shadowy weed-tufted parking lot, where others lounged, but moved away when they appeared.

“I’m gonna show you somethin,” said the man, drawing out his wallet and opening it.

But opening it for himself at first, for he brought it close to his face as he looked in, and a pleased, proprietary glow seemed to beam from his Olmec features. For a moment, he gloated over the contents of his billfold.

Then he extended and spread the wallet open before Ricky. There was a fat sheaf of bills in it, hand-worn bills with a skinlike crinkle. It seemed the money, here and there, was stained.

Reverently, Olmec said, “I bought this from the guy that capped the guy it came from. This is as pure as it gets. Blood money with the blood right on it! An you can have a bill of it for five hundred dollars! I *know* that Andre put way more than that in your hand. I *know* you know what a great deal this is!”

Ricky … had to smile. He saw an opportunity at least to *gauge* how dangerously he’d erred. “Look here,” he told Olmec. “Suppose I did buy blood money. I’d still need a witness. So what about *that* man? Will *you* be my witness for … almost five grand?”

Olmec did let the sum hang in the air for a moment or two, but then said, quite decisively, “Not for twice that.”

“So Andre got me cheap?”

“Just by my book. You could buy witnesses round here for half that!”

“I guess I need to think it over.”

“You know where I hang. Thanks for the drink.”

And Ricky stood there for the longest time, thinking it over …

DAGONIAD

Dee guessed that being fifty-five meant that your thighs and your butt were just going to be a little thicker than you liked, no matter how much you strode up and down the hills of beautiful San Francisco. You just had to settle for being tight-muscled but no longer looking it so much. At least the aerobic high was the same as ever, powering the slopes, a nice blue flame of oxygen in your lungs. She was moving through the upper Haight now, aiming to cut across steep Buena Vista Park, thence steeply down to Divisadero. Her dear old friend Babs had told her to take a hike, that she would mind the store for the last three hours—a gift Babs offered frequently, and Dee too often accepted. She guessed she was having age issues. Testing and training her strength was a growing concern. Babs, five years farther along, was helping her through it.

Actually, Dee looked pretty good, if she only knew it. Had vigorous gray hair worn neck-length, and out of it thrust her strong face, wide intelligent gray eyes, her seamed cheeks gaunt, her mobile mouth quirky with thoughts as she strode along. And she had a walking stick, which gave her a certain style. She'd found it years ago in a Mission District thrift shop—a stout yard of hardwood headed with a brass knob and tapering to a weighty ferrule. It was a stick unmistakably, on hefting, weighted with a core of iron. A wonderful implement, she often thought, fraught with socioeconomic significance. She imagined a late nineteenth-century gent out for a long perambulation through Dickensian streets. Feral dogs and Cockney thugs stepped from foggy alleys, and the gent (she imagined him fifty-five years old, gray-haired but sturdy) was ready to deal with them. Dee liked dogs. She had an easy authority with them bred of her liking them, and she could pet and converse affectionately with big wandering strays of all breeds. But she could also imagine meeting a mean one and, at need, bashing it silly with a stroke of old Rod (as she'd named her stick). Could imagine bashing a thug, too, at need.

She carried Rod gripped low-center at present, like a cudgel, and she occasionally gave him a little twitch, as if thumping something. Although she'd been walking wanderingly for hours, getting her workout, drinking in her gorgeous City, this evening she had a destination. She was going to see Susy, her bedeviled ex-lover, still loved. Dee was always more or less pissed

at Susy for her reckless living, but on most occasions tried to lighten up and just enjoy her company. This evening, however, Dee had to talk some hard truth to that sweet but silly bitch.

So she thumped the air for emphasis as she walked and, alone on a path through the park, said softly, "Just open your *eyes*, girl! Read the papers! Brutally murdered. A man you know! A pimp. You *know* a fucking *pimp!"*

Time was Susy's trap too. She'd just rounded fifty and was deeply freaked, meaning more sociable and hilarious and party-down than ever. She lived by selling eighths of Humbolt skunk-weed, meaning carrying them in her pockets and selling them wher*ever*. Susy was the kind of woman, if she knew you, you were a friend. So she sold as she went, wherever she ran into a "friend"—to friends in the restrooms of bars, to friends met on the BART or in a restaurant, to all her friends in the shabby old Hyperion Hotel. She was so afraid of herself, so afraid of being old and alone, that she was throwing herself away with both hands.

Dee came down Divisadero into the Castro. The sun was just setting. She had half an hour to relax with a beer, get calm, so she could make her case in a way Susy would have to hear. She stopped into the Gin and Beer It.

And noticed, once she'd sat at the bar, that her young friend Scat was back there at a corner table, hunkered down like a cute little raccoon in her bandit mask of mascara and shadow, her black hair short and sleek as fur. Dee waved to her and was bringing her ale over to the table before she realized that the girl's stare was without recognition. Scat looked completely elsewhere. She looked scared.

Scared was just not Scat. She was a nervy little minx, bright as a button. She'd walked into Dee's and Babs' bookstore, Treefrog, several months ago—black microskirt, black sequined vest. "You got any Clark Ashton Smith?" she asked them. "Or any Mythos?"

"Mythos like Lovecraft?" asked Babs.

"Yeah, Lovecraft." Then a glint of raccoon humor. "I'm a hooker that reads."

Babs smiled. "If you're a hooker, I think you are a sweet lovely young woman who's making a terrible mistake."

The girl laughed—a good laugh, quick and rich. "Well … thanks, I guess. So …?"

Dee said, "No Smith, dear, I'm afraid, but there's a few Lovecrafts down there at the bottom."

After that, the girl stopped in every week or so to feed her fantastic-fiction jones, and had gone out for a beer with them a couple times when they closed up shop. A bright kid, merry and invulnerable …

"Are you all right?" Then the explanation dawned on her before the girl answered. "Did you know that pimp that was killed? Is that it?"

"It was Nolo. He was hooked up with my best friend Serena."

"God damn," Dee said softly. Sat down across from her. Here was another one, one living even more dangerously than Susy. Scat's youth and her boldness made you forget it, but she too was throwing herself away, and with far more left to lose. "Listen. I'm going to visit a friend at the Hyperion Hotel. She knew him too. Why don't you come?"

Out of a long silence, the girl asked, "Does she know why it happened?"

"I don't know. She might not even know it *did* happen." And was going to add, *She's suicidally careless like you*, but bit it back. The girl seemed too stunned for nagging.

And said nothing for blocks as they walked down toward the Mission. The sky was indigo, the poisoned-candy-colored neons burning. People were quick-stepping, dinner in mind. Dee felt hungry herself, and the cars seemed to growl with appetite, beasts thinking of meat. The girl, though born to walk boldly, had a kind of cringe in her gait tonight, and Dee had the odd notion that Scat heard something abroad in the restless evening and shrank from what she heard.

"Scat. Do you know something? About that killing?"

The girl gave a twitch of head and shoulders, not so much a negative as a shaking off of the question itself.

They were buzzed in the big battered old steel door and climbed the crackly rubber carpet-runner up the stairs to the Hyperion's first floor.

"Is Susy in her room, Elmer?" Dee asked the bony-chested old rooster behind the bars.

"Wull, she come up a little while ago."

Meaning sociable Susy was at least in *someone's* room.

But they found her in the doorway of her own, giving a friendly thwack to the tattooed arm of a youngish man with a waxed baldy, who said "Thanks, Sue!" over his shoulder as he passed Dee and Scat.

"Hey Dee!" Big hug from lean, lively Susy. "I've seen you around," she said to Scat while still hugging Dee.

“I’ve seen you,” returned Scat more dully. Susy scooped up flung clothes to make them seats on her bed.

“So you guys wanna brew? A toke? Not you, of course, Dee. Hey, I made you some cookies!” Susy had just perched on the room’s one chair and was ready to launch again, playing hostess.

“Susy. Just sit. I’ve got an agenda. What about Nolo? You knew him, right?”

“Knew him? He’s a friend of mine! I buy bud from him sometimes!”

“Jesus, Susy! You didn’t know he was murdered? Brutally murdered, unquote. It’s in the *Chron*!”

“You are *shitting* me.” Susy was awed. The years were drawing her face ever more sharply, but she still had a haggard beauty when she was laughing, or amazed. So much sweetness in her, really, her delight to make others delighted. And so afraid beneath it, afraid to let the party buzz die down, to hear time marching her life along. “Gods that’s *so* … so *unreal*. I was just up at his house a couple days ago. Up in Bernal Heights. Serena and I got high in their Jacuzzi on the back deck!”

“Right there!” erupted Dee. “Right there is what I came to talk to you about, to talk to *both* of you! Just please look at how you live, Susy! You smoke dope in a pimp’s jacuzzi! And you!”—wheeling on Scat—“You *hook*, you brainless little bitch! How *can* you?”

Startled out of her fearful brooding, the girl bleated a defense. “Hey! I only do hand-jobs, OK? And not that often!”

“Oh great. You only do hand-jobs. Would you both just open your eyes? The so-called Underworld can *kill* you. There’s nothing *romantic* about it.”

“Romantic? Hey. I’m a realist! Love and romance, that’s *your* illusion, Dee!”

“Right, right—you’re hard as nails, etcetera. You’re a pup! You don’t know shit!”

“Oh really?” Scat swiveled her little bandit gaze to Susy. “You know, Serena told me about you two getting high in the jacuzzi. She said you guys both … heard something.”

“Whoa! That’s right! I’d almost forgotten. It was a radical kind of hallucination, like an *auditory* hallucination, and we both had it!” Mercurial Susy was now all gee-wow stoner amazement, brutal murder forgotten. “We were toking in the tub, and we started to hear this sound coming from the sea. I mean we were like two miles from the water, but we *knew* it was from

the sea. It was like whispering, thousands of people whispering, but whispering from, like, under the sea. I swear to God it was so strange-sounding. And it was strange because that almost never happens, two people having the same hallucination like that … Oh my God, it's so awful! Just a couple days ago, all three of us were laughing on their deck."

"Well," said Scat, "Serena told me the same thing. And she told me something else. She said that she told Nolo about your whispering, and he told *her* he'd heard the same thing a couple days before."

A silence. Dee found she had to clear her throat. "Was he smoking?"

"When *isn't* he smoking? *Wasn't* he smoking? I mean, Serena's on tranks up in County General right now. She's torn up about Nolo, sure, he was a pretty good guy. But mainly she is scared shitless. Because she's the one that found his body out on their deck when she got home last night. And she told me that he'd been … half eaten."

"*Eaten?"* croaked Susy.

"Half eaten."

"Christ, that's … even worse somehow. And are you telling me … that I should be scared too?"

"Aren't you?!" asked Dee.

"Why are you asking? I'm scared shitless!" But when they left soon after, Dee had to wonder. Susy was going to spend the night in a friend's room, and she was already treating it as some kind of slumber party. "I'll bring her some of my *good* cookies." A wink here at Scat. "Here, Dee, don't forget your clean and sober chocolate chips. I promise I'll call you in the morning."

On their way down to the street, Dee asked Scat, "What about you? You want to stay over with me or Babs?"

"Dee, I'm OK." Like a ticked teen to a hovering mom. "I mean, it's pretty clear that you're OK if you don't get stoned, right? And I don't smoke."

As they walked down Valencia Street, Dee struggled to digest this. "You think you have to have this hallucination to be in danger."

"Well? That's what it looks like."

"But I mean, how does that work? How does the killer know you've had the hallucination?"

"The hallucination *calls* the killer."

"Whoa. Whoa. How in—"

"Scat!" The call came from across the street. An angular young man stood there, hand half-lifted toward her. He seemed to hesitate, and then began to

dodge his way across the street, but Scat kept walking.

"Aren't you going to—"

"That's Mishou. He's one of my clients."

"Great. One of your clients."

"Stop *saying* that!"

"OK. I'm sorry."

Here he was, an olive boy with a scimitar nose and hesitant black eyes. Dee sensed about him the inwardness of a computer geek or writer. He addressed Scat urgently, as if Dee wasn't there.

"Listen. Listen. I don't wanna *talk* about this, OK? I just wanna *say* it, I just wanna warn you, because, I mean, well, we're friends, really—" Scat half turned away in vexation, and he hurried on: "*Dagon*. I have to warn you. *Dagon*. First, you have to hear him. If you hear him, then you can see him. And if you can see him, then he can take you. But I can't *talk* about it. I don't dare! Be careful." And he turned and strode off.

Dee gaped at the girl. "How does he …? What did he …?"

"We talk Mythos," the girl snapped. "Look. I have to go home. I want to do some reading. Maybe I'll call you tomorrow."

"Why do you have to do some reading? What was he talking about?"

"If I *knew*, I wouldn't have to do some *reading*."

"Look, Scat. I was scared for Susy because she was *close* to this guy, to Nolo. And here it turns out you're *closer!* Serena's your best friend! You need some input about this. You need to change your life!"

"I *will* call you. At the store tomorrow." And the girl spun and marched away, back in the direction Mishou had gone.

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During a lull the next morning Dee, behind the counter, told Babs the whole story. Babs reordered shelves as she listened. The two women had never been lovers. From the first, they had been too close as friends. But much though Dee loved her, Babs had an irksome way of always being the Older, of being calm and judicious whenever Dee was urgent about something. Now Dee was secretly glad to see amazement in her old friend's eyes.

"*Eaten*," she said, after a long silence.

"Half eaten. And even if he was only, like, mutilated, that's bad enough. Maybe an animal attack. A feral dog? But how did it get in the yard? And then, there's this kid Mishou with his weird warning."

"That sequence. Hearing, then seeing, then being taken …"

“As if it’s some … Entity, and not just a psycho or an animal.”

Babs resumed her shelving. Her thoughtful eyes scanned and alphabetized.

“She promised she’d call me,” Dee said after a moment.

“What are you going to tell her?”

“To get the fuck out of the Mission, for starters. To stop hooking.”

“Sound advice.”

“Babs. What do you think it was?”

“… What were the alternatives again?”

The girl called the store three hours later. Babs said, “Take off. Go meet her at your house.” Scat surprised Dee by agreeing to this idea.

She must have been en route already, because when Dee reached her tall, narrow little house in the hills above the Haight, here came Scat, not a block away.

“You making something to eat? I’m hungry.” The girl was clearly determined to deflect serious talk for the moment.

Both in her eating and her shopping Dee was somewhat haphazard, veering between feast and famine. She bustled after what could be found, telling Scat, “Sit out on the balcony. It’s the best thing about this house.” And shortly brought out to the table on that narrow little promontory a block of cheddar, a quart of lemonade, Susy’s cookies from last night, half a baguette, and some butter.

The girl *was* hungry—and so was Dee, it seemed. As they set to, Dee identified landmarks in the rumpled, house-crusted hills subsiding to the north, and around the blue Bay beyond, narrowing on the left toward the Golden Gate. At length they relaxed in the afterglow of eating and gazed at the view. It grew more beautiful by the minute, the westering sun bathing it all in amber light, the City’s great growl dwindling to a rumor as it rose into this golden sky.

Dee said, “Dagon.”

Scat gave her a level look. “He’s like a sea-monster god. He’s one of the Great Old Ones. But his sea, his ocean, fills not only this space, but other spaces, and not only our time, but other times. And he hungers for all living things, to add them to his … dominion.”

“That’s what Mishou was talking about?”

“Yes.”

“And you think … what?”

“Well Dee …” Again she fixed her little raccoon gaze on Dee’s. “… I’m not ruling it out.”

Hearing this made Dee realize she’d been forgetting just how young Scat really was. Such a kid, really! Hand-jobs to boys her own age. She was a “hooker” because she just didn’t know how to be friends. She was, or wanted to be, a loner. But they, her “clients,” called themselves friends and, in this, seemed to understand her better than she did. Poor brash lonely Scat! A little gotta-be loner, and both desperate and romantic enough to be willing to believe that the Mythos actually lived …

Such a radiant afternoon! The City’s hubub had grown even more remote. All the City’s business seemed like a big Important Party, such a world-shaking event to the revelers, of whom none suspected what small potatoes it was, what a tiny little shindig, really, under the bigness of this sky, islanded by the waters of this sea …

Dee’s heart had already been open to Scat, but she felt it open wider, now that Scat had called back to her what it was like to be young and intense. What it was to look at that blue reach of Bay out there, opening onto the earth’s greatest sea, to look at that, and see time-spanning titans stirring within its depths.

And was this really so wild a thought after all? Was it not pure miracle, this world, this universe? The deeper you looked, the more colossal its entities. The harder you listened, the vaster and more multitudinous its voices. Listen now. Wasn’t that a strange new stirring she heard?

She *was* hearing it. Was suddenly aware she had *been* hearing it. A soft sizzling—vast!—as if a whole stratum of atmosphere had been set to simmering. It was the whisper of a million million tongues, but an oddly silken susurration, a whisper lubricated by some medium. By water. That simmering stratum was not the sky, but the sea that girdled them upon their hillside perch. It was a tide of sinuous sound, of urgent utterance … of woe! Of woe and lamentation eternal, that seethed in the boundless deeps and hissed in a sprawling corona around some one thing, some huge and central thing that was its core. Some titanic thing charged with a dark intent. The whispering wailing host environed this lone hugeness, their Master.

“Oh shit!” Dee moaned. She looked in Scat’s eyes and saw there the image of her own dawning terror. “I *heard* it!”

“I heard it too! I’m stoned to the gills. It has to be these fucking cookies!”

“Jesus Christ, I think you’re right. I haven’t been high like this in thirty years! Susy mixed them up! She makes straight ones for me and doped ones for other friends. The silly bitch gave me the wrong box!”

“… We *heard* it!” groaned Scat.

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Dee sat listening to Babs’s long silence on the other end of the line. She watched the last sunlight draining from the sky, her sane life drawing away with it, a new life of madness and danger sliding over her like a dark blanket.

“I can’t believe you’re telling me this on the telephone,” Babs said at last. “If you two are in danger you should be over here at my house where the danger’s less likely to find you.”

“We *are* the danger, if there’s anything to any of this. If we’ve *heard*, then we’re *found*.”

“I can’t believe any of this.”

“Neither can I! I don’t think even Scat can really.” The girl gave her a broody look and returned her gaze to the darkening Bay. “But we’ve just had … an auditory experience exactly described by a guy who was … torn to pieces. It’s as crazy not to believe it as it is to believe it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“We go by Scat’s, grab her duffel, go by the Hyperion and grab Susy, and the three of us take a motel room far outside of the City for a while.”

“I want to hear from you the minute you’re settled.”

When she’d hung up, Dee stood looking out past Scat at the darkening city. “Come on,” she said. “We’re going to take my car.”

“You have a car?”

Dee backed her rarely used old VW bug coughing and rattling out of her garage. “I took you for one of those earth-first no petroleum types,” said the girl.

“I am, mostly. But tonight I want wheels under us.”

“Good idea. And we should ride it straight outta here.”

Scat lived down in the Mission a few blocks from the Hyperion at the Apollo, a smaller, louder, and even shabbier hotel. They trudged up three flights to a hallway where five out of the ten doors stood open, with five different musics and raucous conversations spilling out. And out of one came a gaudy, full-bodied girl with major makeup who tipped Scat a wave and called back over her shoulder to the room she’d just left, “Two sixers is

all I'm getting, Tye, unless you shake loose some more money," and marched on to the stairs and down them before a slender black man, dark as tar, stepped tardily out after her and called with lazy humor, "I given you all this bud, aren't I? Dollar for dollar you should bring me a case!"

He saw Scat and Dee and seemed struck by a notion. He smiled. "Excuse me, ladies. Can I get a word witchoo?"

"A quick one, Tye. We're outta here."

He came easing over. His tone was sympathetic. "It's just I heard about Nolo, you know. An awful, awful thing! An' I wonder if you talked to Serena."

"Why? Because she found him? Because she … has the details?"

"Naw. Thass not why. But does she have the details?" He asked this with an odd, mild humor, as if he regarded Scat with tenderness and found something delightful in her. Or maybe it was just the bud-buzz he had on.

"Well," said Scat, eyes snapping, "the details might be scary for a brother pimp, Tye."

He laughed. "What's more scary than bein' murdered?"

"He was partly eaten. A big part."

"As I live and breathe. You not shittin' me?" And yet Tye seemed more amused than amazed. It made Scat falter. Both women had the dazed feeling that he saw something in all this they had missed. And he spoke to their thought. "Ladies, it's a big strange world we livin' in, didn't you know that yet?"

"Well …" said Dee, "why *did* you want to know if she talked to Serena?"

"To see if she still be moving Nolo's bud. Because if not, well, I know you a friend of Susy's, isn't that right?"

"That's right."

"Because if Susy won't be coppin' from her, I want her to know I can give her the same good deal Nolo did."

Again, with his easy smile, he surprised them. "You know," Dee said, groping for some chink in the man's surreal indifference, "from what we've heard from Serena, it might have been getting stoned that got Nolo eaten."

"You mean, because he started *hearing* things when he was buzzed?" He smiled, just letting that hang in their silence. "Man," he said, rolling his eyes as if searching for words to tell wonders, "I wish I could *describe* to you the things I been hearing. At night, every night, I can hear things like … pouring into the streets, like *leaking* in from under the streets, coming in from the

ocean, you dig? They sound like … cold smoke when they move, an' they be like moaning an' jabbering. You know I never knew what it *meant* before: The Universe. The spaces in it, an' the voices, the millions of voices …"

"But don't you …?" said Scat. "Aren't you …?"

"Hey, this is huge, ladies! This is the Universe, showing itself. If it's *there*, I wanna be *aware*. Aren't you tired of this little ol' dirt-box world anyway? Aren't you jazzed to meet a *miracle?*" His shirt-pocket chirred, and he plucked out his cellphone. "'Scuse me, got some biz. You tell Susy, hear?" He went back to his room.

The women packed Scat's duffel bag, carried it down to the Bug, and drove to the Hyperion—all without trading a word. They were listening. Tye heard it in the streets … and exulted. Could they hear it? And if they could, would there be something more than mere terror in it for them as well?

Elmer, at the desk, told them Susy was gone. Had come in, but gone back out just half an hour ago to make the tail-end of Serena's visiting hours at the hospital.

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Susy drives a ten-year-old Mustang, much scuffed by her headlong verve behind the wheel. She has paused at the Skyscraper Bar for a beer and a bump. She'll still have maybe half an hour with poor Serena. She doesn't want to *be* with poor Serena, not really. The terror of what Serena saw seems to surround the poor woman like a mist, and when Susy goes to her bedside she'll have to step into that clammy fog with her.

On her rounds of biz today, Susy stopped by Mission Rock for some fries and beer out on the deck by the Bay. Had a discreet doob for a chaser, felt good and lingered over another beer … and as she sat there, looking at the mighty cargo cranes emptying a ship a few docks down the shoreline, she *heard* again what she'd heard with Serena in the jacuzzi.

Where does that little bitch of Dee's get off telling Susy she should be afraid? Who says there's a connection, even if Nolo heard the same thing? Because that sound, that whispering multitude, there's woe and rage in it, yes, but also … majesty. Also, exaltation. Because she can hear it now, and since this afternoon has found she can hear it whenever she really *listens* for it. And right now the roar of her engine, the occasional blare of horns (for Susy's a very brisk, decisive driver)—these don't obscure it at all, if she *listens*.

All those souls rioting on the silty plains of the sea-floor … And in their midst … a gigantic presence. The drowned host swirls around it like a conflagration of aqueous flames feeding off it. And through their mad chorus, there weaves a note of triumph, a hint of hallelujah—as if those voices are marveling together at their own eternity, their fierce undying energy, their endless change of state …

She parks on an empty side street near the hospital, on an illogical impulse to keep her distance from her distasteful errand. The City seems suddenly quiet. It's as if the hour, all at once, is midnight, and she can hear empty asphalt echoing from the most distant streets, and the echoes she hears are of the strangest kind. As if something is creeping, like the tide, into the city itself. Somewhere, a manhole cover blows out … and out it pours. A hydrant opens … and out it pours. A drain-grate in a curbside goes clanging and dancing across the asphalt, and out it pours: that sinous sound that mutters and whispers in outwelling waves.

She pushes through the glass doors and into light and order. Here she can stop listening and slough off the imaginings that cling to her. A little Filipino nurse behind the main counter directs her and severely reminds her that visiting hours end in twenty minutes.

The elevator seems to take forever to rise four floors! Does Susy really want to do this? Serena's no doubt got good meds, and probably just needs to rest … But besides sympathy, Susy has another reason for coming. Serena knows where Nolo kept his stash, and if he left any amount of it behind she might be glad of some income if Susy can turn it for her, for a moderate commission.

She steps out onto four. The long corridor is empty in both directions. There's 4099, 4100 …

It's so quiet. Is there no one in all these rooms? And don't they need any tending if there are? There's not a nurse or a doctor or an orderly in sight. It's disturbing how, in this quiet, her clogs make so much noise …

But there's an open door ahead, and that's it—4117. Is that a murmuring coming from inside it? Is Scat or someone else already visiting?

As she reaches the doorway, she is surprised. The room is dark, except for faint streetlight from a curtained window in the far wall. And a smell comes out of the room, a low-tide dankness.

"Serena?"

There is an answering murmur, and Susy steps inside. There's Serena in the bed, the fan of her dark hair spread on a pale blur of pillow. But who is this tall figure standing by Serena's bed?

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Dee and Scat walked into an empty lobby.

"Where is everybody?"

"It's good they're gone, let's get up to four," said Scat.

The elevator's rise seemed laggard, leaden, as if it climbed against undersea pressures. They stepped out on four. No one at the nurse's station. Long halls empty in all directions.

"Down here." The girl's voice had the faintest tremor in it, and the clocking of her heels was hesitant.

"Is her door that open one?"

"Yes …"

Something made Dee step into the lead—a quality in the silence that they were being … *awaited*. That was why this great emptiness and silence. Only *they* were the awaited ones.

And so Dee was first to see the darkness inside the room, and a dark complex something on the bed, and was first to breathe in the cold scent of dankness and salt and iron.

"Go!" She whirled and shoved Scat back. "Go get someone! Find someone! Hurry!"

Staggering backwards, the girl seemed to draw from Dee's face the horror she'd only half seen. Death dawned on Scat's face, and she turned and ran shouting, "Help! Someone help us here!"

Dee turned toward the room again. *I have to look. But I won't look long. Just long enough to know. No light, though. No light. Do it!*

She stepped inside.

The misty pallor of streetlight bled through a curtain beyond the bed and laid a silver sheen upon a tangled shape. No. Two entangled shapes. Legs, arms, torsos, heads—two heads. One a black sticky skull with empty sockets and a piano-key grin of teeth, and the other head Susy's, her face unscarred except for the rictus of agony. Half eaten indeed! Trenched to the bone in a spiral pattern. Poor Serena was a stripped skull on a bony stick, her full bosom unscathed, but her midriff gone, just a bloody banjo of pelvis-bone there, while her thigh-bones were still half-trousered in flesh. Of Susy, the

unimaginable carnivore had denuded legs and lower back, her trellised ribs, her cervical spine …

And when at last she tore her eyes away and ran, her mind adhered to the horror that she fled … a horror she was fleeing *to?*

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The rest of that night, and all the next morning—except for a few bathroom breaks and a half-hour breakfast of stale crullers and coffee—Dee and Scat spent in the company of two SFPD detectives. They were middle-aged, very sympathetic guys who only by the sheer endlessness of their sympathetic questions revealed their longing to discover that, after all, Dee and Scat had themselves "mutilated" Serena and Susy.

Periodically in the endless recycling of their routine, Dee found herself alone in her heart with Susy and grieved her death. Sweet, hectic Susy whose only harm was what she did herself.

Through mid-afternoon traffic, one of the detectives drove them back to their car in the hospital parking lot. They got in and just sat there a while, looking at each other, haggard in the full light of day. Fourteen long hours in the useless company of the civil authorities, and they were alone on the streets again, still facing whatever it was that walked those streets with them.

"I say we get the fuck out of here." Scat said it so dully, it sounded as if she didn't really think they could do it.

Dee said, "Nolo heard it and stayed put. Serena and Susy heard it and stayed put. We *have* to leave." And why did her own voice sound just as dull as the girl's?

Because something immense sat with them in their little car. Something more urgent, somehow, than saving their own lives. "What I saw in that room …" Dee began. Then blurted, "There are monsters. There are monster *gods*."

"The Great Old Ones."

And there it was. Do you just run away from a miracle, however dark, however dire—just duck out on a Revelation and hide? Aren't you dead already, if you do?

"Look," Dee said. "Before we run, we've got to … find out more about what's happening here. What exactly did Mishou tell you?"

"He didn't tell me anything. I couldn't catch him, he ducked out of sight. I went to his place this morning, and he was gone. I ransacked Lovecraft, and all I found was what I told you."

“Then we’ve got to go back to Tye. Find out what he knows. He knew more than he said—wasn’t that how he acted?”

“OK, let’s try it. But before it gets dark, let’s get the fuck out of the City—drive somewhere inland at least, away from the sea.”

Tye wasn’t in, and no one else was hanging in his room either—a rarity. They went into Scat’s room to wait a bit. They lay on her narrow bed just to rest their eyes, and passed out.

And woke up just as the sun was declining. They went to the street window. The sky was strange, an opaque varnish of high thin cloud, like pre-storm weather on the Plains. It made the City feel submerged, this brassy ceiling underlit with pale amber.

“Man!” muttered Scat. “It’s *quiet*.”

“Yeah … the whole hotel is quiet.”

Scat opened her door and looked out. “”Tye’s door is open,” she murmured over her shoulder. They stepped out into the empty corridor.

“Tye? Hey, Tye.”

Scat pushed his door farther open. The hall light showed a tight-made bed and a clean, worn carpet. A surprisingly spare and ascetic room for a convivial pimp like Tye. On a small table, under a low dim lamp, a tablet of writing paper lay. The top page was densely written.

Loopily legible this handwriting was, and intense—the writer’s pressure dented the paper with each cursive stroke:

> *Tyrone I’m telling you, one last time I’m telling you this. And coming here to do it is the last thing on earth I want to do and I’m coming here anyway to tell you to get your black ass out of that city. This is not-shitting-you time. This isn’t as real as it gets, this is* realler *than it gets. This is bigger and deeper than the ocean by* far. *When you listen to those whispers that’s what it is, you drunk on Space. You hear eternity in there, eternal life. It sounds like they’re jubilating. But the sound is really more like the surf dragging heavy gravel down a beach, all those souls like a whirlpool of multitudes wheeling in darkness, in His darkness, in Dagon’s Great Drowning. You think you living in that whirlpool? You are* being lived. *I’m going to warn you this last time, I’m going to stand being in this city one more day, but only while the sun is high, to warn you. He increases his host, and they’re like*

cold blue flames that burn off him, burn off his ambition and his greed, and they rage forever with his rage, and they rage forever with grief for their captured lives. You know but you don't understand *how close he is. The rollers that bring in the surf, they his fingers twitching just offshore. He's close! He right down there on the underside of that big blue sea, baby, and what are* you *doing? You sucking smoke!. He needs you to do that, to touch you. Anybody toking, goofing, pushing their imaginations out, distorting their eyes and ears, making them too big, they reach out, and they* realize *he's there. And then he can touch them and tear out their souls from their meat and take them. Because Dagon is ambitious, his power craves to swell. The greater his host of slaves, the mightier he stands among the Great Old Ones. Tyrone you as ignorant as I always said you were. You too toked to understand yourself. You think it's real, but you don't really* believe *it because if you did, you'd turn and run from those whispers like a bat out of hell. Your wings are smoking, baby brother, and it might already be too late for you to run. And god forgive me this is the last and all I can do for you, it's in your hands now, I barely have the nerve to sit here and write this, and once I run from here, I never coming back.*

Get your brain back, Fool! I love you but I'm gone now. Saint Louis is where I'll be, in the middle of the continent. I hoped I'd find you in but this will have to do.

And don't forget either, keep in mind*, Tyrone, that the tearing out of your soul from your meat is a hard, long, screaming passage to eternity.*

I Love you

Shaylene

Dee traced her fingertips over the scored, scribbled sheets, feeling how the writing bit into the paper, as if she could read the writer's terror directly in a kind of Braille. She asked Scat, "We've decided to find out more, right?"

"I think we just found out a shitload!"

"But nothing solid. Not precisely what. Not how."

"We try to find out more until dark. Until *before* dark."

"Until then, to find out what we can. Not to run blind."

“OK.”

“Well, then we should try to find Tye.”

They asked Fat Albert, the gaunt black clerk, if he knew where Tye was.

“Yeah. In some bar or bed or trickspot somewhere in the Mission.”

“Thanks,” said Scat.

“Hey.” The snake-thin old coot seemed to show a paternal gleam for the girl. “You shouldn’t be smokin’ that shit of his if that’s what you after.”

“It isn’t.”

“You tellin’ me it isn’t.”

“It isn’t.”

“Well, he said he was gonna catch some waves when he left. That’s been some time though.”

“He goes down near Mission Rock to smoke by the water,” she told Dee as they headed for the bug. “Bullshits with the old guys that fish those broken piers.”

“If he’s smoking there all day, he’s fishing, he’s pushing *after* it. Shaylene was wasting her time.”

Driving down Sixteenth, under the freeway and out to the bayshore, they found how the day had been spinning past. Up along the shore, in the City, the sun was just behind the skyscrapers, their windows blazing.

“Our time’s getting short,” said Scat, but Dee could feel her will wasn’t really into pulling back now—that the girl too had to know more.

They didn’t see him along the frontage road, or out on the decayed piers. They went into the Mission Rock Café, where the woman at the busy bar told them Tye had been in, left a little while ago, and said he’d be back. They took beers out onto the deck.

Drank those, and had two more. As the time drew out their fear grew, but they bargained with it. Tye would know things they didn’t. The East Bay’s far rampart of windows went from blazing to gleaming, and the lights were coming on. The City’s skyline giants stood in the blue-gray sky. The sun was gone.

“Shit,” said Scat. “Maybe he’s parked farther down, still toking. We drive out and look, and then we gotta *go*.”

“OK. You’re right.”

As they got in the car, they heard what sounded like a shout, its distance indeterminate. They chugged along in second along in second down the wide

empty bayside drive, and perhaps a quarter mile along, near the last of the skeleton piers, Scat said, “That’s Tye’s. That black Impala.”

There was still enough light they could see it was empty. As they slid in behind it, they saw some agitation in the high weeds growing just beyond the curb.

They got out. “Tye? … Tye?”

There was no answer, but they heard movement deeper in the weeds, which crackled at the passage of some dense mass.

“Tye?”

No answer. The crackle had receded down to the waterside. They stepped into the weeds, Dee gripping her stick. The weeds were torn up and trampled here, and even more so just downslope, where there was something sprawled, a shape.

Dee’s free hand found Scat’s. They did not so much step down toward this form, as it and the earth it lay on rose toward them under their footsoles. A sticky red skeleton of hand and arm reached toward them as if it still strained for the refuge of that black Impala up on the pavement. His back was a tree of spine and webby ribs, all tissue-tattered; his lower legs, too, were wreathed in a trench of unsleeved bone. His head was untouched, his face to the earth … and they did not lift it up.

“We’re gone. Now!” said Dee, voice quavering with awe—and yet it was Scat, hauling at her shoulder, who actually got them moving.

They drove back up Sixteenth, the streetlights now shedding their disinterested glow, the neons scattering eye-candy here and there, and the breath of the dusk pouring into their windows felt like cool soft ashes on their skin. They hooked south through the Mission, meaning to pick up Mission Boulevard at Army and take it to the freeway. As they drove along a side street Scat shouted, “There’s Mishou!”

The young man was running, and darted into a narrow, heavily parked alley. “Swing around the block and we’ll catch him coming out!” Dee whipped the bug round the next corner, charged down to the next cross-street, and hooked back. They both jumped out and stepped into the alley mouth.

“Mishou!”

But there was no movement in the long alley, just parked vehicles and dumpsters and back fences. “Mishou?” They advanced into it.

“Mishou?”

“He couldn’t have beaten us.” But they were fifty yards into the alley, and still not a sound in the shadows.

But there was a sound, sudden sounds, back out on the empty street. A drain-grate erupted from the curb and rang dancing across the asphalt. A sinuous mass poured up from the curbside vent—this the two women saw with their nerves alone. They felt this cold outpouring bulge into the night air, felt it approach, felt the delicate bow-wave its smoky advance sent before it. It was in the same air with them, and somehow this meant it was already touching them …

“Go for the car!”

“It’s cutting us off!” And its advance had begun to sound like footsteps, soft, damp footsteps with a rattly sound, as of claws, briskly advancing. And here around the corner it came.

A tall, wide shape of … a man? In a long, dripping overcoat. Drenched hair hid the cavernous eyes and the coat … the coat was a glittery, rubbery fabric … was *seaweed,* and filling its long sleeves were something not quite like arms, which extended webbed claws like great dripping baskets of drowned bones. It advanced on them fluidly, and the fleshy wet wings of its overcoat opened and displayed a long lean plated midriff like a reptile’s, down which were ranked, like teats, a double row of sharp-toothed reptile mouths. “Son of a bitch,” quavered Scat in awe. They spun and sprinted up the alley, and instantly on their heels it came, a leathery friction of clawed feet, and a drizzly wet noise in its wake. And as it gained on them, they felt a terrible tireless lightness in the speed of its pursuit.

“The next street!” squealed Scat. “The market! Light!”

Dee slammed into the very limit of her lungs and muscles that she’d flattered herself were so fit, and then burst *through* that limit on a cyborg surge of screaming adrenaline, yet even so, as they reached the alley’s opening on the next street, she knew the nightmare was too close, could feel its seizure of her seconds away, and in blind panic she whirled and swung a two-handed blow with her stick.

Her shoulders felt a strange cool shock of impact. The creature’s substance had an airy density that slowed her club as it tore through. The towering figure staggered, its torn thorax clouding like smoke out into the wake of the blow, but even as it did so, coiling back to recoherence, the tall shape straightening and regathering to pursue. They took to their heels, pistoning toward the far block, toward the aging supermarket with its half-lit

half-empty parking lot. Its illumination seemed the only help it offered … and already they heard the swift clawed feet loudening behind them, eating up their slender lead …

Again Dee whirled and struck, feeling in the instant of her swing a freezing paralysis flood down her body from the single bony fingertip that had just touched her shoulder. But as her blow was launched, it tore through the outreached arm, her self-command was restored, and with a burst of kinetic inspiration she spun all the way round and smote it again, this time in the leg.

It seemed about to topple, the two struck limbs jutting awry, tenuously jointed with coiling tissue … then in an instant more, that smoky stuff, like ligament, grew taut, and the dripping lich drew upright. Dee gaped at it, still frozen to the marrow by that touch, till Scat seized her shoulder, and they spun away again.

This time building a slightly longer lead, but their muscles, pierced by red-hot wires, told them that if it overtook them again their reflexes would be exhausted, they would be gripped, and taken.

“The hands!” gasped Dee. “They freeze you!” Already the swift clawed tread was loudening, loudening behind them … They pelted across the market’s parking lot. Dee saw a woman pausing at her car to stare, groceries in arm—stare at *them*, her amazement only at their haste, and Dee thought: *Of course, she just sees us, she hasn’t heard.*

As they neared the pneumatic doors, they saw they would be seized in that slight pause required to actuate the entry—and then a bag-laden man emerged from the exit, and they tore round him and inside just before it closed.

After the darkness of their flight, the riot of color stunned them. Everyday reality, with all its dazzling labels, rank on rank of them … how could their semi-solid nemesis have substance, be *real*, in the face of this technicolor sea of mundane groceries?

They turned, and from across a bank of shopping carts it faced them again. Towering and cadaverous, its flabby, briny garment drizzling on the floor, the Taker confronted them. Behind the wet weed of his drowned hair, the dead black buttons of a shark’s eyes glinted, yet in the wrinkled orbits of those eyes, in its barnacled brows of reptilian scale, the women saw an ancient grief unutterable, and a fury at their unfettered lives, and a hunger for their world, their time, their flesh … The black crater of its maw, sunk in

its chelicerate jaws, echoed this hunger, as did the toothed mouths down its midriff, all making some mute carniverous utterance. He raised his dripping talons and beckoned.

The women looked wildly around. There were two or three people at the checkout stations, three or four red-vested staff in view, and these all had eyes—some oblique, some openly staring—only for Dee and Scat, only for their haste and fear, and none for the cause of these. And Dee stood imagining that if the Taker seized them here, then all these onlookers would see their devouring, see the carnal chanels spiral through their flesh, but still not see the Thing that carved them.

“I need a club too,” hissed Scat. “When it’s torn it slows. We have to tear the fucking thing to pieces!”

“Hardware!” said Dee, and they ran for the aisles. Now everyone stared at them openly, though none looked behind them, where the Taker overleapt the shopping carts, his weedy garment winging out from his gaunt midriff, whose tiered mouths gaped greedy as nestlings. His clawed feet seized the polished floor and he launched after them.

Soup cans and jars of gem-bright jams fled past them, Produce, with its butchered green heads and fingers, flashed past, and Dairy streamed by. They cornered hard at the Pharmacy, heading for Hardware, and heard the Taker’s feet slip and scramble for footing before he came on.

“Turn again and hook left,” gasped Dee.

The only things weaponlike, at the aisle’s far end, were the green and yellow staves of kitchen brooms. As they dashed for these, the Taker’s tread came fleetly—scarcely time for Scat to seize one and swing. So Dee turned again to swing a warding blow, and the gaunt raptor dodged past her and seized Scat’s shoulder before the girl could raise her weapon. The girl’s legs crumpled, and she hung slack-mouthed from that bony grip. Her whole body looked saggy and weightless as an empty sack.

Now, so effortlessly dragging his first prey, the Taker held his free talon high, poised and dancing like a snake, advancing warily on Dee, awaiting her next blow to dart around and freeze her in her turn. Now, warding him, backing before him, Dee saw his face as the dripping grave-weed hair curtained off it with his weaving, saw his cheeks two barnacled pits, saw charnel lust now in his eyes, black lamps of hunger. Woe unutterable, woe and rage undying flowed from that face like an icy current.

Exhausted, her legs like lead, Dee retreated, far too spent for a grapple with the gaunt, quick thing. He moved in tandem, answering her every retreat with his lithe advance, and she saw with horror how weightless Scat dragged after him. Her substance seemed absorbed in him now, his speed and strength augmented.

Dee kept retreating, staggering backwards past the meat counter, because she could not fetch the strength to fight … Could no one see, at least, Scat being dragged along by no visible agency? But not another soul appeared, as if the timid few others in the building unanimously shunned the region into which the two running madwomen had vanished. And so Dee retreated in perfect privacy, past banks of plastic-wrapped raw flesh, while the Taker pressed her close, his talon darting at her face.

Behind the shelved carnage, the metal swinging door of the butcher's workroom caught her eye. She thought of cleavers and big knives—her pursuer would have her cornered in another moment anyway. She backed round the cold shelves and butted backward through the door.

A long, guttered cutting table. Sinks. A big glass-doored freezer with sides and quarters red and white hanging inside. Knives and cleavers *there*, racked beside the table. She bolted for a cleaver, and the Taker—dragging Scat doll-like—leapt after. She plucked the cleaver, whirled and flung it.

It tumbled slicing slantwise through the Taker's face. And in the instant when she saw its sight obliterated, seized with inspiration she stepped in, swinging a two-handed blow with her stick, like Babe Ruth sending one out of the park, and sliced Rod straight through the narrowest part of the Taker's midriff.

Then dived, hooking one arm round his thighs and hauling his legs out from under him. Scrambling, worming across the floor, dropping her stick for a two-armed grip round its waist, she wrestled his lower half out from under him, bulldogged the kicking legs to the side, while the upper half dropped to the floor, thrashing, releasing Scat to scrabble with both talons after its stolen limbs, still blinded by the cleaver, but sensing its lost substance and trailing ghostly entrails from its gut-stump as it crawled.

Dee gained her feet and manhandled her staggering demi-captive back towards the freezer. Scat was rising, shaking off her paralysis. "Open both freezer doors!" Dee cried.

Scat overtook and overleapt the still-blind Taker's scrabbling talons, pulling the doors open. Dee wrestled the legs inside and crouched there

waiting, feeling their struggles diminish in the cold, though still it took all Dee's bear-hugging strength to keep her kicking prize captive as the seeking torso crawled into the nearest door, pursuing. Here it came, groping under the bulky carcasses, its eyes at last recohering within their nest of snaky hair …

"Close it!" she shrieked, and dove, with the legs still captive, out the other door, surged up, and slammed her door in turn.

The Taker clawed the glass, gazed out with eyes that, only now re-forming, were swiftly frosting over.

"Look how it's slowing," breathed Scat. "It's water, mostly …"

They waited to be sure, during which time they took turns using the stick like a bat, on the staggering legs, smiting now one, now the other, crippling it in what became like clockwork … until the imprisoned upper half had frozen solid, its frosty mask of woe staring sightless from the glass.

Dee and Scat looked amazed in one another's eyes. Their victory seemed an impossibility as great as the existence itself of their otherworldly enemy.

"This isn't Dagon. You understand that," said Scat.

"We beat it, though! We kicked its ass!"

"You know what we should do? We should defy him."

"Dagon." Dee said it dully, not quite asking.

"Dagon. Look at this thing! What good could meekness do us against its master? I say fuck him! What right does he have to our world? To our lives?"

They stood still more amazed to find in themselves this same feeling, a resolve to match the dire miracle that had reached out for their souls. Dee took the stick and crippled yet again their captive's relentless circling search for the rest of itself.

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The hardest part was getting it back to the car. When both its legs were broken and its leverage reduced, they could just manage to wrap their arms around it and carry it, staggering against its spasmodic strength. When its legs had reknit, it was too strong, and they must drop it and cripple it again. They had to do this three times to get it out of the market—the last time in full view of the checkers and customers still present, who stared in undisguised astonishment at what must have seemed to them the most incomprehensible mime act they had ever witnessed.

But once the pair had it in the back seat of the bug, things got easier. Dee drove, while Scat knelt in the passenger's seat and clubbed the captive with measured, strategic blows that kept its substance in a constant low boil of recoherence. She soon found just the rhythm, just the force needed to keep the demi-demon discohered.

It was well they had this surreal activity to engross them, because the bug's rattly progress back to the Bay, back to the black water's brink, gave them a sinking feeling, while fear, like a weight of dark water, rose over them …

At last they rolled slowly along the weedy shoreline, all deserted now, rolled past the skeleton piers, their engine muttering like a low soliloquy of doubt and terror. Did they *dare* this? They did not dare to pause and ask the question.

Dee killed the engine. They stepped out into the breathing silence of the shore and dragged their trunkless captive from the car. At once, drawn to its element, it staggered away from them, kicked tangle-footed through the weeds, and down the bank towards the water. The women followed, slow with awe and dread.

The light-crowned bridges, the long dazzling shorelines—these seemed for all their expansiveness a trivial, weightless decoration, a constellation of fireflies hanging between the abyss of night above and the oceanic gulf below. And that gulf breathed, as the sea always breathes, but this respiration thrummed with an added presence almost as titanic as the waters themselves, filling those waters with a darker, mightier will than their own, a lurking purpose, the waiting hunger of Something that wore the ocean like a garment.

They came within a few yards of the water, stood watching the ghostly amputee hasten into the sea, as if it sought a thing it dreaded and yet must obey.

"Look!" hissed Dee.

The water just offshore swelled, bulged up in a broad, low dome. The hair rose up on their necks—they crested like fighting cats. And as the Taker's remnant kicked into the tide, from the swollen water the oily sheen of black knuckles as big and barnacled as boat-hulls bulged from the skin of the Bay, and huge, tentacular digits slid into a snake-knot round the Taker's legs. The vast hand, snatching back its messenger, submerged.

The plane of the whole Bay seemed then to sag, and that subsidence dented the watery floor of the night.

They stood there a long time. “Let’s get away from the water,” said Scat at last.

Half an hour later, Dee parked the bug at the lookout up on Twin Peaks. They got out and went to the parapet. They gazed on the down-flowing hills all mantled with lights and brave architecture. They scanned all the glittering shorelines nibbling at the water’s black rim.

Out of their long staring silence, Dee said, “What keeps him from just coming ashore and taking it all?”

“He’s locked out. With the other Great Old Ones. But …”

“But what?”

“But I’ve been hearing things. Before all this I mean. I’ve been hearing about shoggoths. I’ve been hearing about Cthulhu himself.”

“What are you telling me?”

“That somehow, this is a focus. That the Great Old Ones are … at the gates. Are picking the locks.”

Another silence passed as they looked some more upon all the dazzlement and darkness.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing, girl,” said Dee. “Be all that as it may, to hell with running. I’m not running anywhere. This is *my* city.”

TSATHOGGUA

An elderly woman named Maureen, neatly dressed and manicured, sat on a bus-stop bench in San Francisco. She was watching the leisurely approach of an old shopping-cart vagabond up the sidewalk. Maureen believed in being courteous to everyone, but the vagabond woman strongly irritated her, perhaps because Maureen had put her dear little Buddy to sleep not so long ago. And the gaunt, sunburned, wild-haired tramp was pushing, along with other things in her cart, a box with a tiny, sick-looking little dog in it. A whippet.

Maureen and her friends in her church discussion group had been talking about Speaking Out lately, about not being so courteous when something hurtful was done. About protesting in the name of decency.

"I'm sorry," said Maureen, a little loud and unsteady at the newness of this, "but I just think it's disgraceful. Whyever you've chosen to degrade yourself, I think it's terrible to subject that poor little animal to this existence! It's unforgivable!"

The old cart-pushing dame paused—she had a long stark tendony frame. In her baggy jeans and denim jacket she was deep-seamed old, but one of those bionic oldsters, tight and sound as a banty rooster. "Hey," she said. "We've spent his whole life walking around this city. You think because he's dying he doesn't *wanna* get around any more? I'm his chauffeur!"

"But you should put him to sleep! Look how decrepit he is!"

"He's *going* to sleep. You think I wanna rush him along, who's been my friend his whole seventeen years? You've gotta excuse me, I'm taking us home for a bath right now."

"You have a home …?"

"What am I, wearing a label? You see me dressed for walking, you think I'm homeless?"

And on she went, her cart rattling softly. Maxie was her name. Her hair was white, but luxuriant still. She wore its shag like a plumed battle-casque hooding her brow, head, and neck. It tendriled like tree-roots on her gaunt denimed shoulders. Her ancient whippet Ramses, though, was aged beyond all vigor. She bent her face to him as she pushed, and Ramses, a living

skeleton, raised, in palsied dabs, his tiny muzzle toward her, sniffed too, now and again, the early autumn air …

In the front of the cart was a kitchen-box of goods and utensils, and next to it the bedding-and-clothes box. Last night they had shared their sleeping-bag among the trees below the Legion of Honour. Had a twig fire in her firecan—invisible from twenty feet away. Had soup and tea for them both, and then some blazing stars to look at above the Golden Gate. Ramses had gone to sleep. Maxie had reread and relished Mitchell Smith's *Due North* by her tiny reading light.

Here they were back at their building. Maxie's home, Butler Street County Housing, was sited in the hills above the Panhandle, the neighborhood at least a nice one. The building had its own little parking lot and well-kept plantings all around. She had a niche in these where she always tucked her cart. She took the knapsack of her and Ramses's dirty laundry, put her two days' dirty dishes and cooking pan into its side pockets, and slipped it on. Had already slipped on the child-carrier pouch frontwards and tenderly hoisted Ramses, holstering him against her chest.

Her apartment was on the third floor, and there was a lot of hallway-life on the third floor, hang-around kids and young men with drugs to sell each other, and attitude to maintain in front of each other. Everybody poor and desperate enough to make violence always an uneasy possibility. Inside the entry she turned hard right for the stairs. The tough element always claimed the elevators. The stairs were faster anyway, and better exercise.

She emerged in the hall of her wing and found her local, mainly Hispanic crew on duty. Their lead rapster, in a sideways-billed cap, was a guy she thought of as Dog. That's what he called Maxie because of her always carrying Ramses, and what he called her now:

"Hey, Dawg! Dawg's back! Wassit gonna be? You need to pay you police services fee. Now iss twenny aweek, Dog, why you don't pay up? You gotta pay the Vig, Dog! You gotta pay the Vig!"

This was the way it was supposed to go: Maxie would reply I'm not payin anything! Get outta my way! She would say this, but not try to get past them. Then Dog would push his bullying little riff again, and then Maxie would refuse again—all while his audience just sort of idly enjoyed the show of Dog putting Maxie her through her paces. And then, at last, they'd let her pass.

But this afternoon Maxie was wrung out. That crazy woman had ticked her off, reminded her that truly, Ramses was near death. Scared, weary, and pissed, she snapped, “Leave me alone! Get your lazy candyass outta my way! You moron! *Vig* is interest on a loan! You’re trying to extort *Protection* from me, you ignorant asshole!”

That stopped Mr. Dog hard for a moment, took him like a punch, her steely contempt where he’d thought himself comfortably feared.

If Dog hadn’t had his whole crew with him, if it had been just him and another one he particularly hung with, a guy they called Carne who had sick dreamy eyes, then he would have hit her, certainly cracked her jaw, or some part of her body.

As it was, he shoved her, the heels of his hands to her shoulders, and she stumbled backwards, fighting to keep her feet under her, and Ramses safe in his carrier. Back she came, marched past them to her doorway, got inside …

As she ran the tub full, Maxie faced it: a line had been crossed. They’d laid hands on her, and it might come readier next time. These kids had nothing, possessed not even the barest information about their world. They would cling to whatever sad debris life brought their way. Would seize and cultivate any contest that got started in their hallway world.

It was on the chilly side in the bathroom. She put Ramses in the electric blanket while she bathed and washed her hair. Bathed him next, while their tomato-soup-with-cheese-melted-in was cooling—Ramses’s vitamins mixed in his, Maxie’s in hers. After they ate, there were all the utensils to be scoured and repacked in the pockets of the knapsack. She cleaned and flossed her teeth, and then hung Ramses in a clean carrier on her chest and took up the knapsack of wash. Time to check out the laundry room.

She cracked her door open. The corridor was empty. She made quick time to the stairwell and slipped inside it. Stood listening.

Ten flights of metal stairs and scarred pipe-railing above her, a zigzag of six flights below her. From the laundry room door would well the echoes of any activity. Nothing.

She always listened before descending. People partied down there, dealt, OD’d occasionally, and Maxie always stood ready to turn on a dime and truck on out to a laundromat in the neighborhood—more expensive but hassle-free.

She started down quietly. Got down four of the six flights, the laundry room and the maze of storage lockers that surrounded it sounding perfectly

empty … and then there came one very soft little resonance of metal.

So minor a sound, like the slightest tap against the hollowness of one of the big washers or driers down there. Listening, listening … she heard nothing more.

It could have been the stir of someone … hiding down there.

She peered into Ramses's face, checking as she'd done through the years for his reading of a risky vicinity. He looked up at her, feebly alert, but inscrutable. Ah, how her little sidekick's life had waned …

A flare of anger started Maxie down again. She was sick of dodging around this gloomy, risky place. But old persons, well, the whole world was bigger and scarier for them all. If she was tired of ducking and maneuvering in the world's brutal bigness, Maxie should just give up, right? The fact was, she would save two bucks using these machines. That was an extra cocktail at Pete's tonight. So. Was she getting so chicken-shit that she didn't dare go down there and win herself a bit of luxury?

The stairwell door hung open, and the laundry room beyond it was deserted. She walked down both aisles to be sure, checking the bank of driers. The long-defunct machine back in the corner still stood with its door open, though the band of yellow plastic tape across it had been broken …

She approached it down the damp concrete aisle, where suds lay on the floor by the bank of washers opposite. A faint, ragged noise rose from the pouch. Ramses was growling a warning … and there was something big inside the drier's black drum.

A person. A woman? Yes. A little Latin woman, curled up as if asleep. *Was* she asleep …? And as Maxie leaned her head inside, Ramses's little growl grew echosome.

Asleep. She breathed softly, the little brown moon of her face childish and candid, seeming to dream …

On drugs? Drunk? Whatever, leave her be. You stick tight to your own business in this place. She backed quietly from the drier, and something squishy crackled under the heel of her Nike. She turned around.

One of the big washers behind her had shut down mid-cycle, had a load of unmoving suds in it, while the door of the one beside it hung open, thick suds dripping from the door's glass eye. She'd trod in the mess of foam it had shed on the floor. There was her shoeprint in the suds, and something small and dark crushed in its midst.

A slug? It always smelled so earthy down here, and right now more than ever. The dense dirt the whole building was rooted in, you could feel it right outside these concrete walls.

She went into the other aisle, got all their wash into one load, and set it going. She put Ramses down on the floor and was folding his pouch into a little mat for him, when he got up and tottered off. Maxie smiled. Sometimes the earthen aura down here persuaded the old Ramses that he was outside where he could take a dump. Let him. It would be small and dry and easily scooped. She watched his trembly progress.

Damn that self-righteous old bitch, but it was true: her poor friend was on his way out. Maxie had gotten him for Jack in those last two years Jack was dying. Jack had named him, for his habit of ramming blindly into things as an impetuous pup. Fifteen years dead, the dear man. How she missed him still! And now old Ramses here, the last piece of life they'd shared, was passing out of the world …

Maxie opened *The Guns of August* and fell right into it, re-entered that vast machine of long-ago armies locked in stasis, locked in butchery …

She would allow herself an extra cigarette today—six, not five. Her regimen iron-fast these last ten years, her six-smoke days were an indulgence earned by its rarity. She lit one up and gorged on the satiny entrails of a Marlboro's smoke as she read …

Going to dry her load, she saw Ramses down at the end of the aisle, sitting before the little Latina's odd dormitory, his gaze alternating between it and the lush suds still undecayed on the floor. When Maxie started her own dryer, it roused no stir from the sleeper. How strange to have a little dreaming neighbor like this. What kind of life would the girl step back into when she woke? What dangers, disorders, unmet needs? How many years did she have left? Far more than Maxie had, no doubt.

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Maureen had one of those decent-sized little backyards some houses have out in the Avenues, and she and Muffin were out in it, watering their flower beds. The dog two yards over, King, that dreadful big mastiff of Wyatt and Eve's, was barking again. His relentless barking had long ago worn a blister on Maureen's patience, and then the blister had become more like a callus, though sometimes it was more like a blister again …

Meanwhile little Muffin, also vocal, was yipping incessantly at the hose. Maureen thumbed the water into a fan and moistened the trilliums, finding

Muffin’s puppy-relentlessness a little trying after all. Maureen had been younger when she’d broken in her beloved Buddy. But if you loved small dogs, you had to handle that hyperness that goes with them, especially at first.

No one could replace Buddy, of course. The grief for Buddy, whom she’d had to put to sleep, came to her again, as Maureen had long ago accepted it would. She gazed down upon Muffin, trying to see in him the dear companion he would become in future years … and as she was musing in this way, the hose she held gave a kind of lurch in her inattentive grip, twitched sideways, and sent a stronger stream down on Muffin, drenching his head in mid-bark. The dog shook himself, and then began to lick his chops, while Marueen looked closer at what seemed to be a thicker kind of water now coming out of her garden hose. It felt slicker to her thumb and fingers, and it splattered rather than splashed on the soil …

And against the background of the soil, into which it quickly soaked, it was hard to tell … but weren’t there, like, little black clots in the water? They soaked in too fast to be sure.

Then the water ran normal again. Some bit of debris in the line.

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“I don’t drink *that* much, Maxie,” Vera said, stabbing the bar with her forefinger, “and I saw what I saw. You enjoying that drink?” Vera had a sharp nose for a black lady, and little tufted, alarmed-looking eyebrows that made her eyes seem on the brink of outrage.

“I am enjoying it, and I am listening.”

“What number is that?” Referring to the cigarette Maxie was unlimbering.

“Two. I get six today. I might smoke two in a row, sitting on this very stool.” Maxie waved another round from Pete. She had Ramses in the sling —would have wanted to bring in his box and put it on the stool next to hers, but Pete drew the line. “The dog can come in, but not in his *bed*, for Chrissake! I already let you park your goddam bag-lady cart out back, Maxie! This is a bar! Jack would have said the same!”

“Jack loved Ramses!”

“This is a bar, all right,” put in Vera, “but this is a Neighborhood Bar. It celebrates Neighborhood Diversity, including the whackadoo practices of the local seniors.” Elbowing Maxie’s ribs here. They had been neighbors for seven years, and then Vera had protested against the decline of the Butler

Street Housing. She had agitated and done the red tape till she was re-lodged in a better building. And now, that building was already as bad as Butler, if not worse.

"So. What do you *think*, girl? About what I saw? Look at me. Do you think I'm drunk?"

"No."

"Well, this is exactly how I was last night crossing the Panhandle. So you going to just dismiss what I told you?"

Crossing the Panhandle at about two A.M., Vera had seen a man lying on a bench under one of the pathway lamps. He was passed out, it seemed, as she approached, still a block away, but then the man suddenly appeared to be struck by seizure. His legs started violently kicking out as he lay there. Vera hurried forward, the path curving and some trees blocking her view for several long moments as she limpingly picked up speed, striding as fast as her bad left hip would let her …

When she came back into view just yards from the bench, the man lay quiet again, totally still, his eyelids shut, his face slack, his left arm hanging off the bench—and one of the legs of his trousers flat and empty on the slats of the bench.

"I like to've wet myself," were Vera's words. She had seen both legs kicking in the dim lamplight … and now this empty fabric tube … And just then, she heard a scraping, as of rough skin wrestling through undergrowth … She caught a blur of movement off in the grass to her right.

"And it reached some bushes, and right where it left the grass and pushed in between 'em, I saw something big and thick worm itself across, with like pebbly skin!"

Vera pursued, too astonished to do otherwise, and the grass, uncut for some time, snagged her jerky gait. There was a curious tearing sound and then a vigorous, receding slither. She groped into the bushes and threaded her way into the clear again. Between the trees along the Panhandle's border she glimpsed, across Fell Street, something big moving low to the ground, reaching the far curb just ahead of an oncoming truck and diving into the darkness beneath a parked van …

And Vera, in the weeds near where she stood, found a shoe, its laces still tied but the whole shoe ruptured, a bouquet of tatters attached to a sole. Dazed, unwillingly, she returned to the bench. There was no sign of the man. In a cluster of bushes not too distant, she heard a muffled thrashing. "I

thought it over, but then I heqaded home. No way was I messin around in them bushes."

Vera glared at Maxie, awaiting her response.

"Well," said Maxie. "I can only say … that's strange. And I have to add … that last night was obviously one of those occasional nights when you get a little drunker than you think you are."

Vera looked at her gloomily. She didn't seem to want to challenge this, but didn't seem able to believe it either.

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Maxie cruised down the pleasant asphalted lanes of Golden Gate Park, trending down seawards. The sun, while still an hour high, sank into a rising layer of mist, and dimmed to a martian wafer, brick-red. A sharp wind came up and started driving the mist inland through the Park, draping streamers of fog through the towering cypresses and tangling it in the eucalypti's blown cascades of gray-black foliage. Shreds of mist licked her face, and she tucked Ramses more warmly in his box. The weather-shift stirred her. In the white-out of driving mist, the great trees rippled like coral reefs in a streaming sea of air.

Wind always excited Maxie, though it bit her harder in her lean old age … Ramses seemed stirred too, looked livelier up at her from his thick swaddling, relishing the silver rush of the air. "Put you to sleep?" she scoffed. "Crazy bitch! Isn't this an amazing evening?" She crossed the Great Highway and walked along the seaside promenade, pushing their cart's rattling prow into the wind. A surprisingly thick foam churned on the surf, the caked yellow froth of hard-lashed seas. Copious fragments of it came tumbling and winging across the broad beach. They climbed the embankment, to fly in chunks and tatters across the promenade, scud out into the Great Highway, and plaster the passing traffic here and there with rags of dirty bubbles …

The cold spray licking Maxie's cheekbones felt dense and glutinous. And, through all this wind and the sharp sea-smell, there was a haunting swamp scent, a fetor that belonged to dark murk and deep jungle, not at all to windblown coasts … Yet here it was, eddying inside the cowl of Maxie's parka, probing her nostrils with the smell of putrefaction …

She trudged up past the Cliff House, past the guano-bleached crags just offshore in the surf's crash. Even this high above the sea the dirty blizzard

still blew past her, crossing the pavements … Tonight she'd go into those trees again, up beyond the pits of the old Sutro Baths …

Soon it was falling dark, but by that time they were snug in the lee of two close-growing trees, lying back half-propped on a mattress of dry needles and fern-fronds, she and Ramses snug in their waterproof fiber-filled mountain bag. Plenty of hot-burning cypress twigs lay broken and stockpiled, while the tiny trail-stove housed a hot little blaze at their side and heated her cocoa in an enameled tin cup. They lay back looking from the gaps in the trees down on the narrowing waters of the Golden Gate, the Bridge ankle-deep in the steel-gray sea. The vista grew dimmer, as the headlights rivering atop the Bridge grew brighter. Beyond the Bridge, mist filled the Bay, and muted the glints of the city-lights along its eastern shore …

Maxie lit her fourth cigarette of the day—two more still to come!—and congratulated herself, not for the first time, on her long-ago inspiration to take to the streets, to spend two-thirds of her days and nights outdoors. How much better the night sky was than any ceiling! And how much better to be moving around! Where in the world was there a more beautiful city than San Francisco? Why lie in any box in the time you've got left, eh, old girl?

Her shopping cart had been an inspired idea—a declaration of poverty, a protection against thieves. She'd found the perfect way to go abroad in the world. She took a deep drag and streamed it up toward the first shyly appearing stars. Sipped her cocoa. It would be sweet to have Jack beside her now. They could describe to each other how grand and impossible the Bridge looked, bestriding the sea …

"I miss you, my love," she said quietly. It always hurt her to say it aloud, and always had a sweetness too, as if Jack just might hear it …

Within the murmur of the wind in the trees, within that restless commotion, she felt wrapped in the conversation, the hum of the forest's green life … was that a trickling sound she heard?

There was a moon well up in the misty night, and when Maxie peered into the trees for the sound's source, her eye caught a glinting something in the ferns a few yards to her left.

A little seepage from the loam? Maybe something a little more profuse than seepage—she saw a silvery little braid of movement there. It was months since any rain.

She finished her cocoa and got out her second-to-last smog. Snapped it alight and blew the satin smoke from her nostrils … The sound of the night had changed around her. The hillside seemed restive in a new way, not just with the wind's passage, but stirred by little secretive movements everywhere, a host of small half-hidden lives all working in the earth and in the leaf-mold and among the roots of the trees, the roots right under her …

She consumed the cigarette, cupping the coal between drags so the wind wouldn't accelerate its burn-down. And by the time she'd finished it, she decided that, when she'd gathered ferns and needles for her mattress, there had been no seepage over there, where now she saw one. She weighed her comfort against her curiosity.

In the end, that restlessness in the earth goaded her to action. She extracted herself carefully from the bag, resettling it closely around Ramses. Stepped into her jeans and her Nikes …

Only a glow of embers came from the square mouth of her tin-can stove. She stepped across springy earth into deepening shadow.

Here was a shallow cleft in the sloping soil, and a leakage, not of water, but of a loose viscous fluid, bubbly with strong curdlike bubbles that put her in mind, somehow, of the suds dripping from that open washer door this afternoon.

"You oughta watch out for that stuff."

The voice was calm but so unexpectedly nearby that Maxie had a neural meltdown.

"You sonofabitch! Don't you have the manners to greet someone? What're you doing, sneaking up to me?"

"I been standing here ten minutes. I thought you saw me." But there was a sour humor in this old man's eyes that confessed he'd enjoyed making her jump. He was small and lean in dark sweatshirt and jeans, helmeted in a black wool cap with a tiny brim and earflaps, his face all gaunt in there. But he had a major handlebar mustache that was remarkably thick for a man this old. The 'stache made Maxie think of a ragged white alleycat draped over a fence.

"So why are you standing *here!* There's plenty of room on this hill. We want our goddamn privacy!"

"You shouldn't be lyin here! That's what I'm tellin ya! You gotta watch out for this stuff, for anything comes from the water table."

"For anything that comes from the *water table?*"

“You speak English, doncha?”

“Better than you.”

This made the handlebar man mad. “Maybe so, but you don’t *know* shit. Just do yourself and everyone else a favor and don’t step in it, if that’s not too complicated for ya.”

And he walked off into the trees—pretty quiet and quick in his movements too, and soon gone from sight and hearing …

Maxie crouched down over the seepage, stirred around in it a little with a twig. It was clotted, with little shadows in the clots. She’d grown up in the Central Valley. “Frogspawn,” she said. Or toadspawn, up on these moist hillsides. That’s all it was. The ’stache man was an urban whack, freaked out by unfamiliar Nature. She sighed and went back to her sleeping bag.

Snuggling down and cradling Ramses, she told him, “That guy seemed almost sane at first, didn’t he?”

But, deeper in the night, Ramses’s movement woke her. He had climbed her shoulder and stayed there with his muzzle aimed at the seepage. And remained so, after she had fallen back into sleep.

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Maureen had fallen asleep in her Barcalounger, snug in quilts with the clicker at hand and Muffin curled on her lap. It was Muffin’s sleeping there that had put Maureen under, and now it was his gentle movements in her lap that awakened her. She had a vague sensation of small, light forms dispersing across her thighs …

Her wakening was hazy and slow, for she’d had one of her nice pills before she and Muffin settled down. She raised her head, so comfy and heavy. Yes, there he was in her lap, his adorable little muzzle thrust up inquiringly toward Maureen’s face, and his little fawn-colored flanks so fluffy. But …

Maureen hoisted herself a little higher. Muffin blinked calmly back at her. But Muffy had no legs. No legs at all. Muffin was only his head, his fat fluffy little torso, and his tail. He looked perfectly sleek, like he’d never *had* legs …!

Maureen was utterly, albeit groggily, astonished.

And just then she felt a delicate movement across the slipper on her right foot.

The shock of it gave her the hydraulic lift to sit all the way up. A slender little jointed shape jackknifed off her slipper and vanished.

Scooping up Muffin, Maureen surged to her feet in astonished terror. Here was her dog! As smooth as a little guinea pig, but without even a guinea pig's tiny legs! He was just a plump, furry tube! His tail wagged in response to Maureen's hands, but lackadaisically. His jaws were slightly parted, and he seemed very lightly to pant.

Maureen set him on the couch, rushed, whimpering softly, to the phone, and punched out her vet's number from memory. Soon she was in a frantic altercation with the vet's answering service, Maureen crying bansheelike that an ambulance must come for Muffin and herself and that Dr. Groner had to come *in* to meet them at the pet hospital at once! Maureen encountered, within a suede glove of courtesy, an iron fist of refusal—and then was galvanized to discover, in her pacings, that Muffin had disappeared from his nest of cushions. But how could the poor dog *move?*

In a panic she dropped the phone and searched under the sofa. Down the hall behind her came the little clap of the backdoor pet-door. It was only 'Tasha, Maureen's cranky old portly little Persian, waddling dourly toward her. Still in shock, Maureen responded by rote, going to the kitchen to be sure 'Tasha's dish was full. The kitchen was dark but a slant of light from the Barcalounger lamp showed the shadow of food in the dish. Wasting no energy on greeting, 'Tasha padded a beeline to her supper.

Trembling with determination, Maureen took up the phone again. If it had to be 911, so be it.

A thump and a slithery scrabbling and the rattle of spilt kibble brought her head round. 'Tasha lay—half in shadow—thrashing mightily, and what looked like long tapery fish with froggy skin, three of them, were eating her legs! Three of her legs as the cat kicked and thrashed them in the air and clawed at them with her one free paw, but the fish, muscular, powerful, swallowed her legs into their froggy tubes with great gulps, lurching closer to her torso … *four* of them now! For Tasha's tail was also taken, by yet another of the little monsters that lurched suddenly from the darkness! Oh, dear God in Heaven, what was happening?

A commotion rose from the back of the couch and she whirled. Around from the back and over the top poured another one of these toad-skinned fish, much bigger than the other four. Maureen screamed and leaped backwards, stumbled and fell back into her Barcalounger. And saw that atop this bigger monster's toadlike skull there were two little tufted peaks, and instantly recognized those dear little saliences: they were the tips of

Muffin’s ears. But already they were no longer like ears. They were melting, sinking to a tarry substance that seemed to weave itself into the toad-skin hemisphere, melting to a dark resin that was already merging with the monster’s amphibious skin. This had been Muffin! This hideous fish! It launched itself, and the creature—big as a cat itself—seemed to have only ’Tasha in its sights. It launched to the floor and thrashed across it, pushing itself along by—Maureen saw them now—the thrusts of four little legs that looked almost like fins with little clawed feet …

A strange calm fell upon Maureen. All this was so impossible that it was … fascinating. Maureen’s religion had a dimension of true feeling in her heart. The world’s dazzling multiplicity often moved her deeply with reverence and awe. And often she inwardly exclaimed, Behold the wonders of God’s creation, for how can man conceive any end to their variety?

For look! The lesser fish had fled to the shadows already, and now ’Tasha had only one leg and no tail. Gamely, Tasha hoisted her head to encounter the big toad-fish’s advance, its glossy parabolic jaws gaping wider, wider, as it thrashed its way across the floor, and leapt, and engulfed ’Tasha right up to her remaining leg. Then it reared up its toadlike gullet and bolted ’Tasha’s leg down too.

Maureen watched in awe. And terror too, of course, but encompassing the fear was a bemused sense of privilege for being honored with a revelation. She was being shown a miracle. She was not the futile, undistinguished woman she had, unknown to herself, feared that she was! She was being shown a miracle, and it filled her with gratitude.

Or perhaps this terror simply had made her insane?

But she did not feel insane. She felt … tingly. Her thumb itched, and from it a kind of heat seemed to flow out and into all the rest of her body. She lay back watching ’Tasha’s devourer calmly. The creature seemed slightly to swell, to change—its tail a bit shorter, its legs a bit bigger and more clearly jointed. It waddled its way down the hall, out of her view. There was a clatter of the pet-door. And Maureen felt herself alone in the house.

Her body was quite comfortable really. And this was just exactly what she should be doing. After such a revelation, she should be lying here comfortably, meditating upon the wonder of it and raising hossanahs in her heart to a beneficent God capable of such wonders and loving her enough to share them with her …

- - -

At sunrise Maxie rose and broke camp. Went upslope to the cluster of trees where she'd hidden her cart, and then down to the coffee shop just above the Cliff House. Here they accepted her with Ramses in his sling. She had a couple eggs and a cup of coffee. Went to the restroom. One thing about walking around all day was, you were regular as clockwork.

She had a second cup (having laid out her money with a dollar tip—as always) and savored it as she looked from the window. Watched the waves rolling in below the bare foundations of the vanished Sutro Baths. There was still a lot of foam on the waters …

It drew her attention. No gale now to froth it up, but big yellowish mats and ridges of this lather mantled the waves. And still, on this morning's milder breeze, it blew ashore, even way up here. Little rags of it tufted the dead water of the two square tarns that had been the Baths.

Outside, she got Ramses into his box-bed and rolled him on down to the paths that networked the site.

When she was closer to the pools, she saw that the froth lay unmelting. Odd. Come to that, it was odd there was so much water in those pits. What was the norm for October, after months without rain …?

She pushed to the path beyond the site, and out a ways around the shoulder of the bluffs … The foam lay in a shore-hugging band, not that wide, really, and seeming to narrow as it wrapped around the headland, toward the Golden Gate. Like a great decorative scarf flung round the cliffs' base …

"It's me. Over here."

Again calmly spoken … but this time Handlebar-man stood fifteen feet upslope from her.

"That's *much* better," Maxie said. "I hate being snuck up on. So, you talk about the water table … you know about water in general? Like all that foam down there? There's no wind to whip it up …"

"Ocean's part of the water table. You don't think it *honeycombs* the whole damn peninsula here?"

He let a silence follow.

"OK," she said. "So …?"

"I'm not good at explaining. I hafta show you. You'll hafta park the cart and bag the dog."

“Have you been spying on me? How do you know I carry him in a sling?”

“Hey. I know every walker in this city. I get around. I keep my eyes open. So do you wanna believe, or do you wanna bury your head?”

“… in the sand?”

“In the sand.”

“Lead on. I’ve got a knife” [true] “and I’ve got a gun” [untrue] “and I know how to use them” [untrue—both of them].

He led them back up into the trees. She parked her cart under cover, slung Ramses on her chest. Ramses looked alert and eager, as if today an added amperage coursed through him. The little whippet had always been her warning system, and he was telling her to follow this man.

“I’m Maxie.”

“I’m Leon Petrov.” He didn’t look back at her, leading them upslope through the trees, rounding the shoulder of the headland … As they advanced northeasterly, the northern pylon of the Golden Gate just peeked into view, until the woods got thicker and the ground got steeper and she had to give all her attention to the trail.

Petrov’s route, scarcely a proper path itself, crossed many a clearer path descending steeply to the beach below. This crooked deer-trail moved only gradually down the bluffs as it arced round them.

Now the bluff got quite steep and the hillside in-folded deeply. And within this seam, a sharper, deeper gully lay. It was bare dirt, running perhaps a hundred yards down the bluff, heavily overgrown along its crests to either side, but in its depth just bare rock and the reddish clay of the cliffside’s flesh.

“Steep here,” said Leon quietly, stopping, turning to her. “You up to it? We gotta go down to that outcrop by the lower angle—see it?”

“I’m up to it,” Maxie snapped.

Still, it *was* steep, and the earth had to be worked with the heel to furnish footholds, and the shrubs used for steadying handholds. Ramses stirred in his pouch, and his muzzle probed the cold blue morning air.

The rim shelved a little. Petrov called a halt, and they looked down into the gully. A damp breath welled from it. He pointed toward its apex, upslope of them. “Looka there. You see the stream creeping out of this thing?”

The earth seemed moister round a seam in the clay up there, and yes, she could now see that a thin sheen threaded its way all the way down along the gully's floor and into the shrubbery below it.

"I don't see any *flow*."

"Look at that slickness. It's transparent but it's like *thick*, right?"

"OK … there's some moisture, I guess. So what?"

"This gully right here is where all that foam along the beach is comin from."

"Hey, Leon. You've gotta be kidding."

"No. But since you don't know shit, a course you'd *say* that."

"Hey, I don't like your mouth. I don't like your moustache either. It looks like the whiskers on a walrus's ass."

"You've *seen* the whiskers on a walrus's ass?"

"A *white* walrus's ass."

"OK. OK. Why should you trust me? But I'll tell you what. Come back here just before dark tonight, and get into some cover, and stay hidden, and *watch* this ravine. You won't watch long, before you see exactly what I'm talkin about."

- - -

The morning sun slanted through the kitchen windows. From her Barcalounger, Maureen gazed dreamily at 'Tasha's dish, the scattered kibble on the linoleum … and not even a whisker of 'Tasha herself. Tasha had been *eaten* by … what Muffin had turned into!

Amazing as this was, it was just a *beginning*. Maureen had lain for hours perfectly calm, except that her *calm* wasn't exactly calm, it was richer than that, more powerful. She felt a golden wholeness, a physical sense of completeness and purpose. Felt utterly relaxed, and utterly vibrant.

And, stranger than this, she felt … multiple. More than having thoughts now, she seemed to be having a chorus of them. It dawned on Mareen for the first time in her long life that her mind was not really *inside* her body, not exactly, but that rather it was bombarding her body with constant queries and tests from more or less outside it.

And this dawned on her precisely because for the first time she felt that her mind *was* inside her body, or was multiply inside three separate parts of it. There was first her upper body, and she knew it from *within*. She was inside her ribcage. She didn't *picture* her ribcage—she was in it, enveloped in its blood-slick membranes, in the blood-swollen loaves of her lungs …

And her wonder at this was echoed, for she was also inside her legs, separately inside each one, her knowledge tendriled round their long bones like a ghostly ivy, marveling at the architecture of muscle and tendon and vein.

Never had Mareen felt so complete unto herself—felt herself to be such an exotic construction of bone and meat and soul! A wonderful coolness flushed through her tripart self, as if she had been dipped in a tarn of the blackest, deepest, purest water …

So within herself—within her three selves!—did she feel that she did not at first realize that her eyes were closed and she lay in a sun-shot darkness. She willed her eyes to open, and it was revealed to her that she *had* no eyelids, nothing answered the movement of her will. At the same time, this seemed to matter not at all, so gorgeous was the architecture of tissue and vein she lay bathed in, wrapped in …

She tried to touch herself, to learn how she was changing, and it was revealed to her she had no arms … while it seemed her feet were bulging, swelling (with a distant noise of ruptured slippers) and her legs' junctures with her waist were thinning, twisting, and her waist itself was doing likewise … And at the end of this vigorous unbraiding, it seemed three linked tails disengaged …

And Maureen's legs thrust muscularly forth, and they (and her other selves in them) departed, surging reptilically down the hall and bursting—first one, then the other—with a slick whispery sound of passage out through the pet door.

While she who remained in the Barcalounger lay with tail thrashing to a metabolic rhythm, lay enthralled by the great strength blossoming in her newly potent shape.

Transfiguration! And accelerating now. Her flesh became whip-taut and cool. In smooth convulsions, her head and jaws usurped all the mass of her erstwhile body from the ribs up. And her eyes came back! My god, how they came back! Maureen could see all the way around her, her great orbs swiveling like greased ball-bearings, eyes big enough to hold the world, catch every least movement in it.

Then, huge-jawed, her skin a glossy armor tough as leather, she wrenched free of her robe. She leapt, in a cavorting dolphin's arc, from the Barcalounger and hit the floor with the four surprises of little legs and

clawed feet to break her impact. She scrabbled and slithered toward the front door.

By God in Heaven, Maureen was hungry! It was a raging void in her, a cyclone of need. But her head was too huge for the pet-door, and her forefoot too crude for the knob. She rammed the door, cracking it lengthwise, but also hurting her head. She mustn't use her head as a ram yet. Her instinct told her that food was strength, and she would grow mightier with eating. The kitchen window should be easier than the door. She craved something large to eat, and the thought of the back yard—even as she toiled swiftly back down the hall—brought instantly to mind what she wanted to eat. It was when she was out back gardening, that she was most tormented by King's barking.

She leapt up onto the kitchen table. Perched on the table, her legs seeming to grow with every passing second, she gathered herself for a mightier leap—straight at the double panes above the kitchen sink.

Erupting into morning sun, in a sparkling spray of glass, Maureen dropped splay-legged—*whumph*—onto her deep, lush lawn.

King lived two yards over. Even now he was barking, with deep, baying deliberation …

She regarded her sturdy plank fence. She sensed that a moment was coming, not too distant, when she would have hind legs that could launch her right over it … But for the present, she began to ram and claw her way into the soft earth at the base of the fence.

She made rapid progress into the soil. As she worked, she heard the strains of Barry Manilow. That was why King was so vocal—his people, Wyatt and Eve, were out in their Jacuzzi on the back deck, enjoying the day with him …

- - -

With her cart stashed, knapsack packed, and Ramses in his sling, Maxie headed down one of the steep trails to the beach. Ramses was lively, head up out of the pouch, turning the little wand of his muzzle left and right. And there was a scent of something. A cool October day, a shred or two of cloud across the blue, but it didn't smell as fresh as it looked. There was a rankness that flirted with her mind.

Ramses got even livelier. Had to be put down. Tottered to a tree and peed on it. He seemed … conscious of some adversary here, one he meant to meet. She put him in the sling the rest of the way down, but when they

reached the narrow beach he insisted on getting down again and tottered, zig and zag, ahead of her.

Maxie climbed the rocks a little way and saw the yellow, curdled foam mantling the sea for a hundred yards offshore, an unbroken collar arcing eastwards, curving round back toward the Golden Gate. In that direction the creamy expanse narrowed. Would it taper finally to a point of origin?

Ramses was already well ahead of her. She hurried after. Look at the life and purpose in him today! Put him to sleep? The idiocy of that woman …

They picked their way across rock-shelf and gravel bar. Maxie found Ramses's unflagging energy as astonishing as she did the foam, which was indeed tapering, narrowing, till they came to a sharp invagination of the bluffs' wall.

Rounding this, they confronted a vertical cleft that vanished into the vegetation overhead. It was reminiscent of the much higher one Pterov had taken her to, but its cleft was moister and faintly foamy, and from its juncture with the barnacled rocks, a thin, milky threadwork branched out into the sea … The whole great stream of foam rose here!

- - -

Her clawed feet seemed to grow in strength with use—they gave Maureen a surprising amount of leverage in the earth. But it was her massive muscled head, and sinewy fishlike thrust, that enabled her momentum through the loam.

Surfacing in a spray of marigolds (Miss Saunders's largest bed of them, it looked like) she charged to the next fence, and dove again against the earth, the dense soil a medium almost as yielding as water to her miraculous new shape …

And erupted in front of King's sizeable little house, which was in the corner of the yard the dog most loved—for from here he could bark at houses on every side of him. Maxie rose like a geyser of hunger, a craving void that must obliterate this beast. King had spirit. He yelped, he snarled, he lunged—into Maureen's widening, up-rushing jaws, which possessed his forelegs, head, and chest, and lifted his struggling hindquarters skywards.

The game brute was chawing ferociously on Maureen's tongue, a massy organ that felt not pain but tingling imminence, and then that tongue swelled and thrust more deeply into King's throat, a thick, expanding root that exploded King's skull within her mouth. She heaved him back, and yet

again back, bagging the dog—near inert now, just tremoring—all the way down her gullet.

For an indeterminate time she crouched there, hidden by King's house from Wyatt and Eve in their Jacuzzi. Crouched there while Barry Manilow swelled suavely overhead. Crouched there discovering that King within her, though the architecture of him was dissolving in her corrosive stomach acids, though the brain and the bone shell that had held his heartbeats, his thoughts, were dissolving in her hunger, King himself was not dissolving, the animal's spirit emerging intact within her as his fleshly structure crumbled away. She felt, in the darkness of her digestion, the barking brute's horror and dismay, to find himself existing within the black sphere of her belly.

And as if this doleful incarcerated life in her were some kind of dynamo, an imperative deep in her new body, Maureen's bones branched creaking to life, and the muscles of her legs bulged along these bones. Almighty God in Heaven! I behold your wonders and I cry Hallelujah unto you! Behold I open like a blossom under your radiance!

Swelled—in moments!—to half again her size, Maureen could just overlook the roof of the doghouse. In her almost spherical gaze, how shapely did Wyatt and Eve look, waist-deep in their Jacuzzi, drinks at their elbows! And … how she hungered for them! Their fleshiness. In them lay her own more lordly stature! Behold the greatness the Lord declared that she had earned! To snatch them into her need's whirlwind would be to tower like a colossus when the meal was done. Still her hind legs grew, her steel-spring knees jutting higher to her sides, the muscles swelling like melons. And now, low though she squatted, Wyatt saw her.

She met his gaze. Such a square, fleshy young man, very intimidating whenever she'd gone to him with her faint, courteous complaints about King's barking. At present he didn't look threatening, looked astonished … and suddenly Maureen absolutely knew that she could splash down into that hot tub with a *single leap*—

And as she thought it, launched it, thrust old bony mother earth so powerfully beneath her that she hung on air, a weightless bubble sailing the blue sky, and hit the water swallowing, Wyatt already socketed in her vast mouth, so that she reared his legs high in a crown of spray and go him all down with a gulp.

She sat in the water with Eve, pinning her against the tub's rim. Maureen and Eve both sat astonished—Eve at Wyatt's vanishing, and Maureen at Wyatt's arrival within her, for as her cauldron belly's acids licked him swiftly to bone, his mind, his memories coalesced within her own. She knew him inhabiting her, and he, thus pent, knew her.

Loving Lord! You show me, unworthy, your wonders! Your glory is as a feast you set before me!

She was saddened to find that she could not communicate this gratitude to Eve and tell Eve how she was not going to be annihilated, but was to live again within Maureen. Her attempt at explanation produced only a long sticky amphibious hiss, at which poor frightened Eve cried out and peed in the tubwater. Maureen gripped Eve with her forefeet and thrust the young woman head-first into her jaws. Soon, once she was dissolved, Eve would understand, would know it was all right …

For almost an hour longer, her globed eyes dreaming, her body sunk in metabolic meditation, she squatted in the foaming water. It seemed her mind half dozed, while her body grew so vast that stars were coming out inside her, winking on here and there, a visceral swarm of tiny suns …

Then Maureen came more awake. These stars she felt inside her. These myriad points of light … they were her *eggs*. She had to find her way to water—big water, in the dark earth. She had to *meet* someone …

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Ramses squirmed to be put in his bed-box in the cart's prow. Not to curl up, but to sit propped on his rickety forelegs, sniffing the air, his attention drawn everywhere. Her little protector was back … but what kind of danger could waken him so? She walked along California, up Arguello to its end, crossed the Park, thence along Waller (Haight itself, though she liked to scope all the people and what they were wearing, took too much steering of her cart), and then down along Divisadero to the Castro. Went into the Gin and Beer It, which had a back alley where Yves let her park her cart between his dumpsters.

"How's our little man?" Yves leaned his beaky nose down to Ramses, who dabbed his answering muzzle from the sling. To Maxie, setting up her gimlet, he said, "Why didn't you tell me you had a new friend?"

"I don't have a new friend."

"Well, Leon said to tell you, if you showed up, to stick around a little and he'd be back."

“A scrawny whacko with a white ’stache?”

“So you do know him. I’ve known him for years. He’s a walker, like you. And here he is! Well, howdy, Miss Dee.” This to Leon’s companion. A gray-haired woman with a handsome face—gray eyes and gaunt cheeks. She carried an old-fashioned walking stick with a brass head.

Petrov said, “Maxie, this is Dee. Let’s take a table—you gotta talk to Dee, Maxie.”

“Don’t be so abrupt.” Dee poked his shoulder. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Maxie. I’ve seen you around. The thing is, I do have to talk to you. Would you please? Can I buy you another gimlet?”

“Well, sure. Yes, you can, dear.” It was fun using the old-ladyism “dear.” She had the right, had maybe fifteen years on Dee, and liked her too, liked her eyes, both kind and tough. It occurred to her Jack had been just around this woman’s age when he died …

At the table Leon sat opposite Maxie, and while Dee got some books from her little backpack, Maxie asked him, “What are you staring at?”

“I’m just keepin my mouth shut till you’ve heard her an gone through all the usual changes.”

A comeback died in Maxie’s throat. For some reason, his sarcastic conviction called sharply back to her Vera’s two A.M. vision in the Panhandle. Vera was not the hallucinating type. A cold, cottony sensation moved delicately down Maxie’s spine, recalling white rags of sourceless sea-foam, tumbling before the wind …

“There’s no way to ease into this,” Dee told her. “Please. Just listen. And after a while, I’ll tell you what I’ve seen with my own eyes.” And she began to read from a battered gray book.

“‘Our little earth is beset by Titans. In the infinitude of space and time, the Great Old Ones swim like krakens through the deep. Time and again they find us, in worlds that have been, and worlds that have yet to be … anywhere and anywhen they find, have found, will find us, time without end, but in this present time, in the cosmic deep they navigate, there hangs one particular window of light and color that draws them. Like a stained-glass pane high above, it tempts the titans’ appetites with a flash of rainbow radiance. And that is the window on our twenty-first century.

“‘For now, in *our* age, it is this Queen of Cities, skirted by her seas, it is this jewel among metropoli, crowned with towers, limbed with mighty bridges, robed in lushly architected stone … it is *San Francisco* that

beguiles the Titans' mossy megalithic eyes, as they drift through the cosmic Benthos.

"'In our present time, it is toward *San Francisco* they converge, hither they swim! Hither they glide, drawn to this radiant window on the rest of our world.

"'Of the Great Old Ones, the mightiest, dread Cthulhu, is among us already. He appropriates our souls, possesses our wills. Legions of his minions, his devout Ganymedes, already infest our corporate boardrooms, our governments, our churches.

"'Dagon too is among us already. He feeds more frankly on our flesh. His benthic zombies come dripping ashore to harvest our bodies in the night, while offshore his vast hands can seize the greatest vessel and crack it for the nutmeats of its crews.

"'Tsathoggua too is among us already …'"

Here Leon laid an interrupting hand on Dee's arm. He leaned toward Maxie and told her, "Tsathoggua. That's the one you can meet for yourself, right where I showed you. You can meet him tonight. *Then* you'll know some shit!"

- - -

Maureen moved through the foliage of Golden Gate Park in the dusk. She went by leaps and lurks, vaulting through the dense cover and crouching with rubbery resilience through more open ground—and freezing, seizing, and feeding wherever sudden occasion presented itself. She consumed a jogger, a small, quick woman in black spandex. She launched the elastic shroud of her tongue and snatched a wildly kicking cop off his motorbike and down her throat …

And went on, seeking water. Her body knew the touch of water all around her. Each wart on her great surface (she was big as a VW bug now) sensed every molecule of water in a radius of miles. Just west, of course, the mighty Pacific foamed on the beach, but no, this water was too turbulent to receive her tender spawn.

She sensed already the smaller, stiller pool she sought. Sensed too that she would soon meet her mate-to-be. He drew even now toward the selfsame spot. The eggs within her seethed to be born, and thus it was, just as the first few stars were coming out, that she muscled through the foliage around the rim of Stow Lake.

The paths, the little plaza, the parking lot were deserted, but out on the oil-black lens of the lake there was movement and a muted, hilarious commotion. A couple of kids had broken the lock on a paddleboat and ridden it from its corral out to the open water. Bottles glinted and hoarse guffaws broke out, imperfectly muffled. The little scamps! Maureen hungered fiercely for them!

But even as she advanced, a glittery black hugeness erupted near the boat and overturned it. Two human shapes thrashed spray and foam … and were engulfed as one by wide, inhuman jaws.

It was He, and his feeding was her own—she felt it in her own bowels, and her unborn young rejoiced in the feast. Maureen and He were already one, were two halves of a host on the very threshold of being born. Maureen slid down into the lake.

In the silken dark, buoyant as bubbles, they met. They clasped foreclaws and spun and tumbled and spiraled in the satiny deep. For the first time in her life, Maureen knew Love, and knew its consummation was at hand. She broke their grip and swam toward the lake-rim. A muddy cove she found, curtained by leafy vines, and into this she climbed, leaving only her hindquarters in the water. And waited His advent.

His great smooth underbelly surged onto her back. He locked his forelegs round her throat, his hindlegs round her mighty thighs. His cloacum hung just atop her own, still shallowly submerged.

In a delirium of fulfillment, Maureen unpent her eggs and felt them bubble unendingly from her cloacum.

Each bubble was an atom of her own raging hunger, and that hunger in herself was not diminished by its ejection, its diffusion over the black lake. With this birthing her own hunger was vastly magnified, enlarged into this spreading fan of spawn.

For as she spawned, her mate’s sperm joined its stream to hers, the sperm like a gelatinous explosive, a viscous dynamite that individually detonated each little globe of her greed and woke it to life.

Long was their transport! Long their embrace! Long and long the sweet effusion of their kindled brood upon the waters!

Until, at length, they lay spent, lay piggybacked as one in a curious, tingly hiatus … which became a growing expectancy of something else, something more awaiting them, something vastly larger than the miracle they had just performed.

Maureen knew they had just begun, not ended, something grand and glorious. Of course her tadpoles even now a-forming, would within this very night sprout limbs and disperse into the surrounding greenery, would radiate from the Park in all directions and find their way into storm-drains and sewers and backyards and gardens all over San Francisco. But none of this now seemed half as important as what lay before her.

She and her mate crouched, cold to the wonder they'd worked. A greater marvel beckoned them now, a radiant immensity drew them to itself, commanded their nearness as a shining planet commands its moons.

Her mate unclenched her and slid crunching away through the foliage. Maureen followed him.

- - -

Leon led them along the path he had shown Maxie this morning. They talked low and interruptedly, for by moonlight the path was even trickier. "The thing to hold onto," Dee said, "is to know they can be hurt. Can be fought."

"I have to be honest," said Maxie. "I don't think … I quite believe … what you've told me." Back in the Gin and Beer It, Dee had told her a very great deal indeed, as night fell outside and the time drew on to come here.

Ahead, Leon growled, "No problem. You will."

They smelled it just before they reached the gully's edge: a coldly yeasty breath of swamp. He brought them to a place where the rim of the gully shelved slightly. There was crouching room here where the scrub grew more sparsely. The seam was a darkness below them, save at its upper end where the moon angled in and glinted on the seepage from the cleft clay there.

Too old to crouch, Maxie sat on the coarse grass and set Ramses down between her legs on a pad made from his folded pouch, for he whined to be set free. He sat there alertly, still galvanized by that vitality he'd shown all day.

"Just remember," Leon growled. "Don't do anything. We're just here to see. So you'll *know*."

- - -

Maureen had seen a print of a wonderful religious painting somewhere, where all these souls were rising up a shadowy shaft, rising into a circle of glorious radiance above, their faces and arms lifted in love and acclaim toward the eternal light that drew them up to Itself.

That image had stayed with her for years, sometimes made her eyes misty, just thinking of that moment when God lifted his chosen ones straight up to His everlasting bosom.

And this was *happening* to her. The shadowy shaft was this dense night-black undergrowth she climbed through, and her mate, some ways upslope, climbed before her. She toiled her bulk up through the lightless tangle of this World Below, and there was a great light, a Sun above her that she climbed to. Its radiance had not yet burst forth, but it was near, so near! Just ahead up this steep bluff at whose foot they had emerged from the sea …

Tears welled from Maureen's huge globular eyes. She had always *known* this was coming to her! Yes, she had! Not out of pride, but because she had always taken the teachings of her church to heart, had always done the right thing, had walked steadfastly on the higher path …

Now the foliage yielded to a deep bare gully, an incision up the flank of the bluff. Ahead, there in its blade-shaped pool of shadow, was her mate: a mottled, muscled sheen toiling toward the apex of the fissure. The gibbous moon peeked in up there to show his goal: a muddy seam in the clay not unlike her own cloacum …

There lay her rebirth. Her life unending! She climbed in awe. Her mate thrust himself into the fissure, his great bulk smoothly, incredibly received by the dense earth, till shortly only his herculean hind legs were visible. They pistoned once, twice—and he had vanished into the cliffside.

Maureen's heart took wing. She leapt forward, but was still some thirty yards short of her own apotheosis, when something small and snarling hurtled down upon her from the gully's rim. Agony collided with her left eye, and tiny teeth tore at it. This dwarfish but excruciating assault severely traumatized her ecstatic soul. She seized the attacker in her foreclaws—a tiny dog!—and crushed its life out, even as she thrashed and rolled side to side, battering the walls of the gully in her pain.

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It caused a kind of rapture, to see the Impossible so plainly. As Maxie watched the huge amphibian claw its way into the earth, something stirred far away inside her, a primitive jubilation in her soul. It was true! The life in her exulted to know for a fact that the universe was a miracle in progress.

And then she realized there was *another* monster, following the first one up the gorge. In her rapture she rose to her feet—all three of them were standing, as if they were invisible, looking on from another world. There

was a commotion in the grass at Maxie's feet, and suddenly there was Ramses, a stripe of moonlight across the last glimpse of him Maxie ever saw, diving into the dark, his little fangs bared. The dauntless whippet plunged straight down upon one of the second monster's eyes!

The brute thrashed explosively, down there in its darkness, its glossy hide flashing in its throes. "Ramses," Maxie whispered, seeing her little friend killed then, stepping to the gully's extreme brink.

Up where the first brute had penetrated, the moonlit earth moved. The clay tremored, and the seam in it spread, and from this aperture a geyser of glittering flesh erupted into the moonlight. An immense tongue leapt ninety feet down the gorge and snatched back from it, and into the moonlight the titan toad that seemed titanic no longer: the brute Ramses had died defending her from was mummied in tongue up to its eyes. The moonlight flashed on the rill of blood that glittered from its wounded eye, and then it was snatched peremptorily into the cliffside.

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In a dim green light, in an immense cavern within the cliff, Maureen—so silkenly bandaged in tongue, like a fetus undelivered!—was lifted higher, higher … to hang above an alien planet, a single Cyclopean Eye. Its pupil was a tarn of absolute black, ringed with a thin golden iris. The black void fractionally contracted as it studied her, making the pupil seem like an unearthly maw taking tiny bites of her …

And perhaps this was the mouth that spoke to her, for its words murmured stickily in the very center of her mind:

All you've seen and done is mine. All you know I will forever know.

And then Maureen was snatched into a different cavern, a Carlsbad of unearthly flesh, where a sunless sea of acids foamed.

There followed a dreadful passage for Maureen, a purgatory reality! Wherein she swam in acid in perfect darkness. Wherein her meat and her blood and her bones turned to smoke, drifting away from her thrashing and astonished soul.

But then … then she was whole and calm. She was … cleansed. Was purely and only her own immortal soul! In fact, she was Reborn, as her pastor had always promised! And all her memories, all her feelings, were still minutely, eternally hers, delivered out of the body's griefs and woes …

For an immeasurable time she lay in this blissful revelation. But gradually, a tiny question kindled. Why was Eternity … so dark?

But no. No, it was not *dark* exactly. Dimly intricate *visions* swarmed round her, dizzying glimpses that her reaching thought could touch in all directions. Dear God! There was a multitude around her. No darkness this, but a matrix of other souls. Wherever she turned, she met a streaming traffic, a mob of other minds.

Wonder filled her, followed by the remotest little tingle of … unease. This wasn't exactly like paradise. Wasn't it a bit more like … being stored in a tank? Maureen struggled to understand the Benign Intent here …

Perhaps the fault was hers. Yes. She was supposed to reach out completely, to *participate* in her apotheosis. She must really look about her. Really commune with her angelic company.

And when she really reached, dear God, she found a wealth indeed! She entered an astonishingly detailed landscape, sunsets on planets unknown, wars fought in alien bodies, unspeakable grapplings of these indescribable bodies … Entered grieving reminiscences, entered the beloved winds of a carven ice-world where wolvish beings skated on paws of polished bone and exultingly drank moonlight forever gone, entered amoebic manta-rays winging like gossamer through maroon oceans of methane, balletically copulating within a gas-giant homeworld forever gone, entered long-fingered saurians, graceful as butterflies on water-wings like great ribbed fans, farming the continental shelves of amber seas forever gone …

And suddenly she *heard*, understood the ghostly tumult of remembered voices arising from this multitude. It was a stentorian chorus of woe everlasting.

As this understanding dawned, an alteration moved through this whole mosaic of pent minds. An impalpable wave arose, and its front was sweeping toward her … and seized her. She was lifted, was hung in an acid bath of searing light, and every instant of her sixty-five years flashed through her, was lived again in one unending moment. And with her own life, all the lives she had collected were also evoked within that searching illumination—King, Wyatt, Eve, the little jogger, the kicking cop—each intricate detail of their being flowered in her devourer's possessive gaze …

And then Maureen subsided again into that vast anonymity of captured lives, that universal hubbub of unsleeping memories.

Now she understood. Now Maureen knew it all. Oh, how they had lied in that church of hers! How blackly and solemnly and piously her pastor had lied! This was not an eternity in glory! This was not a Beneficent God!

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The sun was well up. They sat on a slope below the Legion of Honor, backs leaning against different sides of a cedar's trunk. They had fallen asleep in these postures some time near dawn, and now awake, they still sat silent for a long time, gazing into space. At length Dee sighed and took out her battered gray book. "Margold says some things about Tsathoggua …" She turned pages. "Yes. Here, right after this passage about Dagon. I told you I've … seen Dagon myself, or part of him." She read aloud. "'Dagon has cruised our world before, came up into the Sunless Sea beneath the Mountains of Madness and fed upon the Elder Race, and in another aeon he dived from the skies upon Earth in the ancient Deluge that drowned it and swam in those storm-tormented waters, snatching into his jaws the flood-doomed nations clawing at the surface, clinging to their rafts and spars and shards …'"

Silence fell. Dee's eyes were somewhere else.

Maxie prompted, "That's Dagon."

"… Yes."

"And Tsathoggua?"

Dee blinked. Again she read aloud. "'But of these Titans, Tsathoggua's is the deepest, most chthonic hunger. His meal is meat *and* minds. The populations he's plundered seethe in his belly, time without end, their spirits intact, a mighty choir of woeful souls, each life a self-knowing cell of the toad-god's entrails, wherein the greedy movement of their devourer's mind sweeps through them, as Tsathoggua, again and again, relishes each life individually, like a miser gloating on his hoard.'"

They sat propped against the tree as on an axis of sanity, remembering the night just past. A very old tomcat stepped out of the bushes: tattered ears, shabby white fur with tabby patches, he came up slowly but purposefully, mere locomotion clearly enough work for him that he wasted no energy on cautious approaches. Came up to Maxie and stood looking at her.

"I wonder if he likes cheese," she said, dubious. Cats weren't her animal. She peeled open a cheese-and-cracker packet from her knapsack.

"Cats love it," Leon said.

This one seemed to. And it turned out he didn't mind Ramses's bed-box either, nor the rattle of the cart, once he realized he could lie safely at ease

in it and look around. He had very scrutinizing yellow eyes. Maxie, looking back into them, was thinking, *Why not? He needs a friend.*

It was a long walk to Pete's, but no one objected to it as a destination. None of them thought of separating, of being alone with what they had seen.

The bar was empty, and Pete agreed to let her park her cart in the back-corridor to the rest rooms, so the cat wouldn't be startled into running off. Not a word was said of Ramses—Pete appeared to understand.

They took a table, three doubles, and a pitcher of beer. They drank in sips, looking into one another's eyes from time to time, wordlessly, just confirming what they had seen last night, what they sat there still seeing, again and again …

In walked Vera, purposeful, climbed a stool, and pointed at the bar in front of her with a look at Pete. Swiveled the stool and sat looking thoughtfully at Maxie and her two new friends. Maxie gestured her over, but Vera stayed on her perch.

"I was just over at Butler looking for you," Vera said. "Big to-do. Copcars in the parking lot. Down in the laundry room this morning? Still dark? That Dawg and his twin, that Carne creep. They were clocking smack down there—Community Market night down in the laundry, right? You know that Ramon asshole from up on four? Well he *said* he was goin down to do laundry, but of course he was goin down to *cop* was what it was. He told the cops when he went in, he saw some big animal *eating* Dawg! Eating him whole! And Carne nowhere in sight—just one of his kicked-off shoes!"

No one said anything, though behind the bar, Pete's hands froze for a moment on the glass he was polishing. Vera gazed with dawning surprise at the unsurprised gazes of the three tired old folks staring at her from the table.

Leon said, "You ought to come over, sit here with us, Miss. Set here by me, why doncha?" Maxie and Dee looked at him. In the bony terrain visible behind his great shaggy 'stache and eyebrows, they were amazed to discern an attempt at suavity on Leon's …

The four of them talked for a considerable while, during which Pete gave up on the glasses and just leaned there on his bar, listening to them. A short silence followed.

"I think I'll have to move out," Maxie mused.

“Move in with me,” Dee said. “A room to yourself, though you might share sometimes with my young friend Scat. We should all be drawing together anyway. All of us who *know*.”

BENEATH THE BEARDMORE

Three humans—however bulkily attired in subzero gear—cannot loom large upon the Beardmore. The largest valley glacier on Earth, the Beardmore arcs 125 miles across the Transantarctic Mountains, dividing the Queen Alexandria Range from the Commonwealth Range at a point some 250 miles from the South Pole.

The Beardmore is narrower and steeper where it climbs the range on its northern side, while its descent toward the Pole is grander and broader. Still, throughout its arc the glacier's width is never less than twenty miles.

This trio, loosely roped at the hip through rings in their climbing belts, were ascending the northern slope of the glacier along its western rim, with the Queen Alexandrias close on their right and the dark line of the Commonwealths seven leagues remote to their left. While they could only look miniscule on such a mass of ice, their bright orange polar jumpsuits made them at least readily discernible. In the fourth day of their ascent, they were just a few miles below the summit of the pass.

Though the ice was steep one could climb it standing, the grade ranging from fifty to sixty degrees, with a snowy crust that aided traction. The altitude, near ten thousand feet, held the three naturally to a very deliberate pace, and the icy slope they'd already climbed—plunging near forty miles below and behind them at that same slant—kept them very careful, kept them spaced and roughly linear in their ascent. Start sliding down the Beardmore, and very soon there'd be no stopping your slide at all.

Meadow led. Her mother, Raven, followed her, and her ex-husband, Karl, climbed at anchor. All of them occasionally drove the chisel-tipped butts of their ice-axes into the crust for extra pull upwards. Meadow led because—wherever their exploit—if *she* didn't lead, her mother would seize that position.

Karl, as he climbed below the two women, smiled within his frost-caked beard—which was iced to almost twice its actual mass by the steady labor of his breathing. His ex-wife's quiet, unrelenting combat with her mother had been an important part of their long marriage, as it had continued to be a part of their almost equally long un-marriage, in which he and Meadow still lived together more often than not.

They'd willingly enough left to Raven (and her fortune) the logistics of getting to the glacier. She had debarked them at McMurdo Sound. From there, most recent expeditioners chose to cross the mountains immediately over the Skelton Glacier and trek along the continental shield, skirting the foothills of the range until, at the eighty-fifth parallel, they headed straight for the Pole.

But Raven had chosen the doomed Scott's somewhat shorter route of over a century ago: from McMurdo Sound Scott had beelined more than 200 miles across the Ross Ice Shelf, and crossed the mountains on the Beardmore's colossal back.

They'd reached the glacier in five days. Their little micro-cat had carried them—over good ice or hard crust—with Karl balancing on the tail-bar. The cat was now parked at its northern end, for they meant to cross the whole glacier, and cross it back, on foot.

Or rather, this was their minimum goal, for they were also agreed that when the Beardmore had been traversed from north to south, they would weigh continuing from there to the Pole.

Karl, from his position down at anchor, happened to catch a sharp look at his ex-wife and ex-mother-in-law in three-quarter profile against the ice-field above them: gray-eyed Meadow's broad cheekbones sunburned, her mother's sharper face black-eyed and brooding.

Over their years together Raven had swooped on them, as it were, and snatched them away to the deep Amazon, to the Alaskan mountain ranges, to the volcanoes of Iceland, to the caves of New Guinea. She used her fortune to coax and challenge them into encountering the most exotic corners of Earth's magnificence. Both Karl and Meadow had long made very satisfying careers publishing their writings of the wonders that Raven had whirled them off to.

Through those decades Karl had developed a perfectly comfortable style of verbal sparring with his mother-in-law: "Hey. Rave. You've corrupted us, but you make our lives so cinematic, so interesting, who *cares?*"

He saw Raven pause in her climb above him. She pulled down her muffler to call up at Meadow, “Hold! Hold up!” He knew this meant another photo-op, and when he saw Raven turn to face down-glacier, he too looked down behind him to escape the camera’s flash. The wide bloom of its light vanished down the colossal corridor of ice that plunged beneath them. She was a good photographer and would see they got prints of all her shots, though if Karl had accidentally gotten into this one, he would be edited out. “It’s the *earth* I’m recording, Karl,” she’d once explained.

Fair enough, he smiled to himself. *Would* they in fact cross these mountains and then go on to the pole and back, another five hundred miles? Though all were hale and hardy, Karl and Meadow were in their late forties, and Raven her sixties … But such was Raven’s relentless soul, and the relentlessly controlling use that she made of her wealth, that she’d already had a supply-cache and a second cat airlifted to the Beardmore’s southern foot, should her daughter and her ex-son-in-law “show the spine” to push their exploit onwards to the Pole.

Meadow would of course accept the challenge. And he, of course, would go along …

To say they had been climbing four days did not mean they’d seen any sunsets. The sun wouldn’t do any setting for another couple of months. Its low, reddish presence lent an opulence to the stark ice and black stone of this world, but a touch of the surreal as well. This was a place where nothing lived, no native life at all. Gorgeous, this harsh grandeur.

But it was a grandeur that had the unrelenting quality of a nightmare; the low sun’s fixity conveyed the oddest sense of eternity, while its reddish glare expressed … malign intent.

He realized that Meadow stood waiting for Raven to catch up to her, and that both were beckoning him. When he’d closed the gap between them, Meadow said quietly, “Company.”

Only then did Karl see it: perhaps two miles upslope of them, there was a tiny figure in yellow snowgear.

The figure seemed not to be moving. Seemed just to be standing … or kneeling? … in the snow.

They resumed climbing, closer together and a little faster.

“Sick?” Raven asked. For the more they ascended, the more it seemed the figure was doubled up over something in front of it. It radiated an intense absorption in whatever it was engaged in.

“Digging?” Meadow suggested. For now it had come to seem, as they studied it, that the stranger was at *work* on the snow that lay before it.

Karl stepped into the lead, and the women allowed it. As they neared they traded glances, quieting their movements. An unspoken consensus settled upon them: the figure’s activity expressed a degree of concentration that felt sinister.

Whatever it was doing, its activity brought it to lean even closer to the snow, its business creating an aura of privacy and concentration that made the three of them increasingly uneasy.

“Should we hail him?” Meadow asked. At this point of approach the shape began to look distinctly male.

“Seems more natural to do it once we’re closer,” Raven said. It was not in Raven’s nature to demonstrate special consideration for anyone till she had made a clear assessment of who they were and what they merited.

The yellow shape still showed no sign of noting their approach, while a low, fitful noise—cough or grunt—could be heard issuing from where his face was thrust so close to the snow. What was he *doing?* Quite definitely a man now, and a pretty big one at that.

“Ahoy there, friend!” It burst out of Karl—seemed to crack the silence like a calving glacier.

The shout jolted the stranger sharply, but not quite enough to bring his head completely around. Instead he half-turned back, thrusting his face into partial profile, and Karl thought he glimpsed that the man was vomiting, or that something was coming from his mouth.

But in the next instant the man flung himself face-first into the snow and squirmed and thrashed there, creating such an epileptic frenzy amid the drift before him that the three of them froze where they stood. Karl spread his arms to fence the women behind him, hefting his ice-axe with his left hand and thinking of the .45 automatic buried too deeply in his backpack for a quick deployment.

But then the stranger, seeming suddenly purged of his seizure, flipped over and lay facing down at them, his back against the churned snow he’d heaped up behind him. His face was a wildness of black beard and brows; his eyes were little inky whirlpools of what looked like both fury and wild delight at once. His paroxysm had left him breathing heavily, and Karl, who was himself breathing hard from the climb, had the mildly hallucinatory

impression that the man's entire body slightly swelled and shrank with his respiration.

"Are you … all right? I didn't mean to startle you," Karl called.

"How could … you … startle me?" So odd—faintly warbling—was the stranger's voice, and so ambiguous his intonation, that Karl stood at a loss. Were the words reproachful? *How* could *you?* Derisory? *How could* you?

Suddenly Karl felt that the three of them stood in danger, or that they faced, at least, a profound strangeness. He struggled to understand his emotions: here he was, feet planted squarely on the frozen basement of the Earth, the precarious sun at hover not too far above the planet's frozen horizon … Here on an immense glacier not 300 miles from the Pole, in the gigantic void at Earth's end, he stood!

And *here* he had stumbled on a stranger who seemed unable to believe there could be startlement at meeting unknown others near the crest of one of the most perfect desolations on the planet …

Quite vividly, it replayed in Karl's memory: the man's furious scrabbling in the snow just after he became aware of their approach. He had *buried* something. Buried whatever it was he had been so busy over when they first sighted him.

"Well then!" Karl said heartily, feeling the utter unreality of the cliché he was voicing. "We'll just be on our way!"—thinking, as he spoke, of his out-of-reach automatic.

"Oh!" the man replied awkwardly. For a moment he seemed to be mentally rummaging for the words he wanted. "Well then … I'll join you!"

A long pause ensued. All four stood staring at one another. Karl cleared his throat and emended pleasantly, but with some stress and volume: "What you *mean* to say is, you'll join us if *we* don't *mind*."

"Oh, yes! Forgive me! What I meant to say! If *you* don't mind! I find it's lonely here." Odd, his intonation. He said "It's lonely here" as if he lived continually on this spot, day in, day out—and had been lonely here for the longest time.

"Well then … why not?" Karl answered heartily, trying to get a fix on those so-directly staring eyes. "And, since you were here first, *you* should take the lead!" There was a strangeness about the guy he just had to probe. He watched to see if the absurdity of his saying *since you were here first* registered with the man.

But the man nodded solemnly … and led off.

As the tall stranger strode out to point position, Karl beckoned the women close. “See where he was digging? We’ve gotta make camp within the next mile or so, so one of you can come back here and dig it up. I intend to stay near him with the pistol from here on out. I mean … he’s not even carrying a *pack!* He’s hundreds of miles in-country! How has he survived this far?

“You guys stay *between* us, till I get the piece outta my pack and into my belt. When I signal you, you slow down and let me get up behind him again.”

It was not lost on any of them that the man hadn’t even thought to tell them his name, or to ask theirs. He wasn’t even feigning normality, and the afterthought haunted them that just perhaps the guy simply didn’t know *how*.

- - -

As he trudged in the van they followed him for less than a mile, till the crest of the glacier was waveringly visible above them in the blown snow. Karl shouted after him: “We’re making our camp here!”

Not far above them, the wind howled off the crest like a banshee and spewed down against them a gale of ice crystals. Karl and the women turned toward a spur in the rock-wall that flanked them.

The stranger wordlessly followed their lead as they gathered within its lee. Karl began to cut and stack snow-blocks to extend their shelter from the steady gale; within the hollow Raven unlimbered the two-burner Coleman, and Meadow unfolded their tent. The stranger stood awkwardly, watching them.

Karl eyed the tent regretfully: he wasn’t going to spend a moment inside it —not while this man was anywhere near them. He was going to spend his night outside, where he could *watch* the man.

He walked grinning up to him and thwacked him on the shoulder more than a bit too hard, sending him into a two-step stagger to maintain his verticality. In delivering this blow, he felt a surprising solidity to the man, a remarkable *density*.

“Shall we go upslope, old bean? Scope out tomorrow’s route?” Karl was testing his tolerance of interpersonal violence, and his tolerance of the ridiculous, for their way up-glacier lay plain before them.

“Splendid!” said the man, and set to trudging upslope at his side.

He mused on the stranger’s robotic compliance. And still it never crossed the fellow’s mind to ask his or the women’s names, or say his own … From

the tail of his eye he saw Meadow darting back down-glacier, hiding her descent in the seams and crevices of the ice.

Meadow gripped the big hunting knife she always took camping, a talisman against her fear. She was going to dig up what that man had been burying, and though she thought she would need no protection against that thing itself, the knife reassured her against what might follow from uncovering it.

Here—it seemed too soon—was the spot: a lump of snow irregularly faceted with the hasty pressures of the stranger's body when he had flung himself down against it and ludicrously lain on it, as if he were just lounging there …

She reached toward it but then recoiled, appalled at touching, even gloved, what might lie beneath it. And so began to *kick* the snow away, whittling it down with the crude axes of her boots …

And doing this, uncovered soon enough … a boot. From which sprouted a leg sheathed in dark blue wool …

In a frenzy of two-handed digging, she tried to outrace the terror that gripped her and threatened to freeze her up if she slowed down for even a heartbeat.

Plainly a man by his size … yes … thick-bodied when she got to his middle, the dark blue wool parka solidly filled with a belly that felt, through the fabric, frighteningly hard, as if, within the garment, it had already frozen clear through.

Just below the shoulders she abruptly stopped digging, because just above the shoulders the enveloping snow was stained red.

"Dear God dear God dear *God*," she moaned. "I've *got* to. I've *got* to."

She couldn't.

"We've got to *know!* Right *away!* They're up there *with* him *now!*" As to a stranger Meadow hissed these remonstrations, which somehow unclenched her just enough and she *plunged*, arms windmilling, tearing the ensanguined snow in a frenzy from the corpse's neck and head, sending the spoil of her digging behind her in a crimson spray …

What this revealed was neither neck nor head, but six inches of denuded cervical spine and a naked skull: even the eyes plucked from its sockets, and every fleshy morsel of the face and throat all gnawed away, save for shreds of skin and hair which—like a hellish confetti—besprinkled its icy casket.

Meadow stood, gasping for breath as if it were her own windpipe that had been gnawed off of her spine.

She saw up on the glacier's slant three small dark shapes, like little exclamation marks printed on the ice-sheet's page. Rearmost, her mother anchoring the tent; a bit upslope, the two men, one of them her Karl, the other the stranger, the *monster*.

She must get back up to them, make Karl see he had to *kill* that stranger *at once*. And right *now* she must be quick, or the stranger might see her discovery of his bloody work. Doglike she reburied it, clawing snow backward between her legs, masking the corpse.

Gasping with her exertions, she realized the vicious cold had stunned and weakened her. Brutal, bludgeoning cold like an incessant beating the earth's atmosphere was giving you, an endless pummeling from the sky. Such a relentless enmity—such hostility from Earth and Air as one, both colossal spheres her foes, hammering her with huge icy fists.

Ah! And to make this hellish place perfect, to *complete* its monstrousness, they'd met its sole inhabitant—a smiling cannibal.

- - -

When Meadow rejoined the others they were regathered too close together—the tent was pitched and the stove lit—for her to tell Raven and Karl what she'd found. She gave them the darkest signals she could with her eyes, but in this ceaseless gale their faces were too muffled to convey much by their expressions.

Meadow pulled the muffler from her mouth and shouted—indicating the tent—"That'll only sleep three!"

"That's right!" Karl shouted to the stranger—"You make your own shelter!"

The man nodded vigorously, eyes wide, and spread his arms excitedly. "Shelter? Wait! There's shelter right up *there!*" He pointed to the crest. "Up *there* is shelter! Let us go right up!"

Up where he pointed, the wind drove down a glinting fog of ice crystals that streamed between the pylons of black stone. All three of them looked at him, grim-eyed. "To the summit—not a hundred strides!" the stranger insisted—and his voice struck a strange, flute-like note of excitement. "At the summit there's a way inside! / At the summit there's a way *down in!* / A way down into shelter from this wind!! / There's a *sea* down in there, down inside! / Where an ancient *city* doth that sea bestride!"

And then he turned, and—altitude be damned—he began to *sprint* up toward the glacier's crest, and was quickly swallowed in the blizzard that streamed down from it.

To the others, who had been toiling for days into ever-thinner air, it was more than impressive. It was uncanny, if not plain impossible. And to Meadow, it somehow made what she had to tell Karl and Raven a degree less astonishing. She reached for their shoulders and pulled them nearer. "It was a *man* he buried back down there! A corpse! He was *eating* the flesh off his face! The corpse's face and his neck are *gnawed away* down to the bone!"

Through their long, stunned silence, the wind howled over them like a Greek chorus shouting outrage and horror at the cannibal crime.

Karl said, "We can't just turn back. He's too fast and too strong. If he guesses we know what he is, he'll attack us. If we just turn back he'll follow, and then can pick us off from the rear. His story about a city means that he wants to keep us with him. Wants us to stay with him because I guess he wants to kill us all." They looked into one another's eyes—looked away, and looked again. "I've gotta kill him while he doesn't know we *know!*"

The stranger re-emerged from the crest. Standing just below it, he waved them to follow with great sweeps of his arms.

Karl led off, and as he climbed his legs were swallowed in the rivering ice crystals, and for all the women could see of his torso, he might have been a centaur, treading on monstrous hooves or claws.

And when at length all four of them had reached the top, the ice-fog assaulted them so fiercely that despite the levelling of the grade it was a grim toil to advance.

More harrowing too, for at surges in the gale, the torrent of crystals became a flood that quite engulfed them, so it seemed they drowned in an icy fury that gnawed the small uncovered parts of their faces with freezing fangs. Even the mountain wall flanking them vanished from view.

Till the stranger, steering them through the gale, brought them back to that mountain wall, to where a crooked seam invaginated the stone.

"It's just at hand, the passage down *inside!* / There are marvels beneath this stone we stride!"

In the scant shelter of this seam, he still had to shout to be heard above the madly musical shrieking of the wind. His cries struck an even more flute-like register, a melody almost of transport or delirium, while the flourishes

of his arms when he said *inside* ambiguously indicated both the peaks that flanked them and the ice they trod.

"Inside *where?"* Karl howled.

In answer, the man stamped his foot and bellowed, "Down beneath us—right beneath us sprawls / A hidden ocean in the mountain's bowels!"

Karl had just gotten the automatic into the pouch on the front of his windbreaker. His sole thought was of the pistol's management with his heavy gloves, the moment and manner of its deployment. "An *ocean?"* he echoed distractedly.

Raven thrust herself between them, thrust her face into the stranger's. "Tell us, please!" she shouted. "Tell us, while we're all listening! Tell us loudly! How do you *like* it? How do you like *the taste of human flesh?* You gnawed his face and neck off of him! You *ate his flesh!*—that dead man down the slope! You ate his face and his throat off the bone and then you covered his corpse in the snow!"

All three stood staring at the stranger, while he gazed back at each of them in turn most earnestly, with an indescribable wide-eyed expression that seemed both sad and compassionating.

"I did so! Yes! Devoured his throat and face! / And would have eaten more, but you arrived. / I know you view such feeding with distaste, / because of course you have quite misconceived / my nature, thinking me of humankind. / Not so! My race—far older than your own— / has long upon your lesser species dined. / This man's not I—I wear him like a gown! / Of him just skin and bone enough remain / for me to use his voice and work his frame."

The wind shrilled and moaned and flung its freight of crystals hissing against them, but somehow every one of this monster's eerily musical words reached them as clear-cut as gemstones.

Karl stood astonished. As he construed these eerie statements, he found himself actually able to *believe* them. Because as the stranger spoke them, Karl's gaze was captured by his eyes, and within those ceaselessly, subtly mutating eyes—though they had *been* a man's—there was now nothing like a man at all. Karl felt he was looking into an endless stream of different creatures' eyes …

"It grieves me to devour one of your kind," the stranger urged. "But might not one of *you*, adrift out here, / freezing, starving, wandering snow-blind, / devour some native creature to endure?"

Of the three struggling to absorb this, it was Meadow who first managed speech. “We’re no more native here than you are!” she cried. “And we’ve killed nothing! You’ve killed *two* of our kind!”

“And how it grieves me! But I can’t undo / the crime which even now forestalls my doom! / And still my life’s not saved till I’ve won through / down where my deliverance lies entombed!

“Please! Let me purchase pity for my plight! / I can guide you down *where I am bound!* / It’s subterrene, yet not devoid of light, / and there a Sea, and City can be found. / That place lies close to hand—not far below. / Are you not explorers? Dare you go?”

Though the howl of the wind never ceased—and was indeed a shrieking holocaust—it seemed like a silence they stood in, so distinctly they heard the stranger’s eerily melodic invitation.

Raven’s mouth moved twice, three times before her answer came. “Will it be a world we can return from?”

“Yes, though that depends on what you *do*—because that sea has many *denizens*, that City throngs with monstrous *citizens*. Forgive me now, but if you wish to go, / the moment is at hand—I’m bound below!”

The gully they stood in spared them just a fraction of the numbing gale that roared through the pass. Karl, Meadow, and Raven stood amazed at the uproar around them and, after a moment, even more amazed at the willingness they felt to follow him.

The stranger wheeled and led them down into a turning of the gully they stood in. The gully opened wider and twisted back into the glacier, till it became an icy tunnel.

As they followed it deeper into the ice, the twisting seam was faintly lit by the glacier’s translucence. It seemed as well that a dim luminosity, a delicate, bluish nimbus surrounded their guide himself, so that he made their ice-bound journey seem submarine, as if the arching tunnel wall were a paralyzed wave.

But *was* this glacier truly static? For—out of the wind’s brute howling—they found the ice had a voice, a vast, dim utterance of creaks and groans, wherein all three felt deep, unceasing menace like a muttered threat. They realized the ice—stupendously heavy—never ceased to grind inchingly *down* the mighty pass it paved. Almost … almost they felt its incremental gnawing on the mountain it mantled.

Then the stranger led them through a ragged portal, and abruptly they were out of the ice and tunneling through *stone*, and perfect dark.

Now only that dim effulgence that the stranger shed gave them any sight at all, while they, behind the little sphere of his faint glow, moved in blackness absolute and trod the stone in pure blind faith that it was there beneath their feet. Their only sense of time was the clockwork of the steps they took descending, descending through the mountain-bone …

Until they discovered that it was no longer a tunnel they trod, but more precisely a deep *channel* in the stone, while above and to the right of them a vast dim void had opened out …

Their channel deepened and steepened, and they were following it down the flank of a colossal terrain.

It was brutally cold. The air faintly stirred, as the vast openness of the underworld they sank through grew plainer and plainer about them. The stranger implacably marched them down and down, his feeble glow a ghost before them as this Tartarus of gulfs and dim vaults declared its grandeur by the loudening echoes of their bootsoles, and the expanding loom of overarching stone. Karl struggled with a mounting disbelief at his own compliance, a growing panic that they walked unresisting behind a cannibal guide down into their tomb.

Now, the bluff they descended yawned majestically to the left, and the immensity they moved in grew more visible, for it seemed suddenly they had a “sky” of stone: colossal vaults of ragged rock, vaults that were leagues and leagues across—all the roots and foundation-bones of superincumbent mountain ranges towering up into the over-world.

Beneath this chasmed sky there opened out a dimpling terrain threaded with dully phosphorescent rivers that all led down to a vast, dark, slowly heaving sea. They rounded a last, half-concealing precipice, and then that black ocean opened out before them its whispering, breathing deeps unending.

Its horizon dimly underlay huge purple-black storm-clouds that seemed foundationed on that abyss itself. Its shoreline stretched endless to left and right, the black waves foaming, phosphorescing in. And less than a mile down an interminable shore, there sprawled a great walled City.

Imperial it seemed, the walls colossal—a full two furlongs high, those parapets of titanic ashlar. These walls in turn were surmounted by great barbicans, within whose crenelations perched gaunt arbalests and catapults

like the crooked, brutally muscled limbs of giant demons. It was the fortress, surely, of some monstrous race, and its walls thrust out fully two miles into the inky sea on huge piers, amid whose pilings the dark surf ceaselessly foamed and luminesced.

Monstrous race indeed! For now, as their guide led them toward it, the three saw that within its walls bristled towers and temples and pyramids and palaces—a very hive of windows that overlooked the ramparts—and saw that in all these windows inhuman faces thronged, filling their frames with sleepless, seething, monstrous vigilance.

Meadow, Raven, Karl, emerging from the trance of their long descent, began now to take in the features of those countless denizens, who swarmed the parapets as well as the windowed towers and spires: multiply limbed, or winged, or grotesquely clawed were many; many were fleshed, but many more than these were furred or plumed or scaled beneath the breastplates and the casques they wore. Some stalk-eyed, others beaked, some jawed like carnivorous beetles, or fanged and supple-necked like serpents …

Inhuman fortress, thronged with nightmares! And all these nightmares, in their seething circulation on those ramparts, maintained unblinking vigilance upon the inky sea whose breakers rolled phosphorescing in beneath their pier …

Halting them a distance from the citadel, the stranger stood gazing, as did they. He stared with dire, brooding wrath, his brow contorting like a nest of snakes. His followers stared in simple stupefaction. They had been led down to a fever-dream of the Impossible. That giant citadel, those nightmare polymorphs who peopled it—all of them twice or three times human stature …! The trio stood gasping, confronting what they felt their minds unable to contain: all those *monsters* were as real as the breath they drew, as the hammering of their horror-struck hearts.

Their guide stood silent, letting the grim citadel and those who swarmed it assault the senses of the three he’d brought here.

“Did I not tell you I would show you wonders? / My gift: the expansion of your hearts and minds. / See prostrate Greatness which base vileness plunders! / See boundless glory which foul Evil binds!

“I make you witness our despoliation, / That you might see our conquered greatness rise / to extirpate its vile infestation— / and witness our rebirth with your own eyes.

“First, then, know that *there*”—he swept his hand at the great piered metropolis, and his anguished outcry rang plangently above the surf—“stands ZANADANE! / My race’s home for centuries defiled / by monstrous things whose presence still profanes / her sacred precincts with their bodies vile!

“Long did she flourish in her glory here / this primal home and nursery of our might / until nigh to her fifteen-hundreth year / when came eclipse! Eight hundred years of night!

“Behold they still benight her, still defile / *Our* Capital, those foul usurping throngs! / Eight centuries we’ve now endured exile / while Zanadane to *shoggothoi* belongs!”

The stranger’s outcries echoed as if from the lungs of a far bigger man. Their reverberations crisscrossed the waters, and in his voice his three hearers felt an ageless outrage and an ancient longing …

“We *fashioned* them, our polymorphous slaves! / Made them to toil in the abyssal deep! / Used them for salvage, miles beneath the waves / where cargo-laden vessels sank to sleep. / For know, our days of Empire and rich trade / With cities just as grand that stud these shores / saw both great commerce and fortunes made / and saw too naval conflicts and trade wars. / Much wealth was sunk—but much might be retrieved / by mighty, mindless brutes which we conceived. / Their wholly plastic metamorphic might / could pluck whole vessels from abyssal night!

“That they should breed Intent, and conjure Guile / even as we bent them to our wish and whim! / That they should plot our downfall all the while / that we—complacent—wrought and wielded them! / Behold their mocking metamorphoses! / In endless flux from shape to shape they seethe, / ceaseless mutation of monstrosities! / To mock us is the very air they breathe!”

And indeed … it was so. So variously monstrous as they were, each one of them, steadfastly viewed, was *itself* a fugue of forms in flux—here a fanged jaw melting to a cruel hooked beak, there a wolf’s eyes multiplying to a spider’s compound clusters—a restless mutation of grotesqueries ceaselessly reshaped those beings one and all.

“Treacherous slaves! To be so new to guile, / and yet so slyly did they *mask* their wiles! / For plain we see now, in our weedy deeps, / that they grew sly while our wits lay asleep, / and while they practiced cunning, kept it cloaked, / then overthrew us with one mighty stroke.

“A mile offshore the sea-floor plunges steep / nigh two leagues down to zones of benthic murk / where vast-jawed things do sprawl, but never sleep / devouring lesser giants in the dark / in which deeps myriad shoggoths all cohered / into one night-black muscle two leagues wide / which, with a mighty shoreward thrust, upreared / a tidal wall which swept in to collide / with Zanadane’s, and seized in foam-white jaws / full half our folk from off her walls and towers / who fed at once those shoggoths’ acid maws / and augmented their imitative powers!

“While we survivors, in those towering tides / were dragged offshore, our tenure thus annulled / and in those deeps our nation still abides / to haunt the citadel that once we ruled!

“Conceive! In the vast reflux of such seas / groping for weapons that we could not find! / Torn from anchorage we could not seize! / Wheeling and tumbling! Broken and bludgeoned and blind!

“Oh, feel with me our wretched outcast state! / We who could build a citadel like this! / To be o’erwhelmed by brutes we did create! / To be compelled to haunt the dark abyss / whence oozed those monsters who now throng our walls! / Who lord it in our mansions and our halls / whilst here we lurk like banished criminals!”

As he said this, such hate in his hoarse voice! Such torment in his twisted face! And his hearers heard more than loathing—heard as well a terrible *nostalgia* in his outrage …

But something kindled in his eyes then, and he smiled. “But why, with strangers from a happier race, / should I our dolors, our despair rehearse? / Why thrust on you our grief and our disgrace / even now, when our ill fortune is reversed?” Here a glint of joy bejeweled his eyes. “Oh, my dear, so comically shaped friends, / (my penance done in one of your odd frames / for that epithet will surely make amends?) / But friends, it seems a thing contrived by Fate / that you stand this moment at my city’s gate!

“For why was I abroad up in your world? / I and many *cohorts*, truth be told. / Stand and see, the mystery’s unfurld. / Stand and hear, the history is told!

“Sweet fruition of a long-sought bliss! / My allies now converge on every fortress / five hundred leagues up-coast and down of this! / And *yours* the rarest luck to stand in witness!

“And when these vile *shoggothoi* are slain / and purged and cleansed are all our citadels, / then there shall echo o’er the heaving main / the solemn

sounding of our temple bells. / And when we've purged as well those citizens / Who made vile Treaty with vile Shoggoth Lords, / and transformed them to sea-floor denizens, / then—pure, renewed—begins our Afterwards!

"To you three it is given to witness all, / yet still up to your sunlit world return. / Whatever you might try to tell will fall / upon deaf ears, and scoffs and sneers will earn!

"When you've returned up to your icy door / your route will in that instant be no more. / What probes your strange reports might stimulate / will prove you comic crackpots to your mates.

"Now in advance I tender my remorse / for homicides to come—not *yours* of course, / but I have found your species' flesh quite sweet. / I knew it long before we chanced to meet / nor are my many fellows unaware / that your breed make a meal beyond compare …

"But come—I have been pent up long enough. / Please stand away, that you might not be splattered. / This envelope of yours is messy stuff … / a trifle farther off—it tends to scatter."

Then explosively, rather horribly, with a mighty flexion of his true and inmost body, he exploded the shell of bone and flesh that enclosed him, spherically dispersing in a spray the much-thinned remnant of his human guise.

Now Raven and Meadow and Karl beheld the true form of their chance-met guide. Freed now, he'd expanded to somewhat more than human stature. His body was a smooth-staved, bi-polar cask, an elegantly elongate cask that tapered both above and below to clustered tentacles. Amid the upper tentacles his pentagonal head, rough-textured like a starfish or other echinoderm, bore an eye on each facet—large, lovely, rather jewel-like eyes of violet and black they were. Great bat-like wings unfolded from the equator of his body's cask, and effortlessly he held himself aloft with slow-paced flexions of those mighty vans, while at both his crown and at his foot, his tentacles tickled the darksome air and palped the rugged stone beneath him.

"My friends," he piped—for now his utterance was more purely flute-like, unmuted by the meaty human sheath that had muffled him—"I've invited you to view what now will pass, / but such a surge of unleashed appetite / assails my senses, my self-restraint can't last. / Not only are my own hungers unbound, / but I must unchain other wilder urges / to hunt at large—I abjure you to begone!"

He turned then, and seemed with his upper tentacles to pluck something—or countless tiny somethings—from the air. There was no visible harvest in his coiled tentacle-tips, and yet when he whirled that invisibility seaward, the waters hissed and freckled with impacts, as if shotgunned with a spreading spray. The water began to seethe and dimple, the disturbance spreading, spreading swift offshore, and everywhere it spread, tentacles and thinner, jointed things like bug-legs and antennae began to sprout like wildfire all along the shore and offshore just as fast.

Their inhuman guide—raptly eyeing this living, flexing crop of pincers, claws, and feelers—missed and thus could not prevent Raven's sudden swift dart toward the surfline, her camera coming up, her flash exploding out across that seething germination of the sea.

As instant as that flood of light there sprang a huge thorny tentacle from the surf, seized her quick as any mantis ever snatched a spider, and she was plucked out into the deep with scarce an after-ripple in the blackly breathing surf.

At Meadow's piercing cry the Great Old One turned and thrust its wide-spread wings at them like huge preventing hands.

"Begone at once," he shrilled, "or be the food of what's devoured her!"

Meadow's heedless surfward lunge was brought up short by Karl's iron-fast seizure. He hooked his arm around her waist, hauled her off her feet, and whirled her away from the surf. She fought convulsively. He gripped her crushingly in both his arms and still she thrashed, wailed, and fought him galvanically, grief and horror like an earthquake in her.

"Begone upon your lives," the Old One shrilled. He turned his back on them and, bowing his great pinions, rose in the air above the surf and hung there. The gusts of his powerful wing-work seemed to kindle an ever thicker sprouting from the water. Jointed clawed legs, dorsal fins, pincers, beaked jaws, the mossy shield-like backs of mighty terrapins, the long undulous backs of water serpents—a broadening column of inhuman swimmers thrust muscularly through the surf and straight across the waters, a broad glittering diagonal like a slanting highway, joined further out by still more massive creatures arising from the deeper murk, until in the moonlight it formed one long braided tapestry of smoothly toiling aquatic muscle half a mile wide now and longer, longer as they watched, all arrowing straight for the shoggoth citadel on its gargantuan pier.

Impossibly that living flotilla *grew* as it approached the fortress. It sprouted the tentacle-clusters of titanic cephalopods that writhed up into view like nude oily trees, eager to embrace the citadel's walls. To swell that armada, from the deeps offshore there surfaced ship-sized shapes in colossal armor: vast jointed dorsal plates, and upraised dripping claws the size of siege engines—crustacea big as whales …

Whales as well appeared from the same deeps. Or whales they seemed at the first eruption of their huge battering-ram heads and little eyes and plank-like saw-toothed under-jaws—seemed until they raised colossal fore-limbs from the brine to hammer the fortress walls with knotted fists the size of battle-chariots.

But were these *serpents* now that followed them up from the deep? They came rippling along behind each cresting wave—supple, lacquer-red lengths so multiply segmented that they flexed as smooth as snakes, but each segment of them had its pair of sharp little legs. Sinuous, lithe they threaded their way amid the pilings of the pier. A hundred strides long was each one, and each knotted together a half-score of pilings apiece and then tightened, tightened until—slender though the creatures looked—the massy timbers groaned and creaked and some began to crack and splinter.

Now the polymorph pier-folk, shoggoths all, half abandoning their bestiary guises, came pouring down the pilings, blades flashing in what still were limbs, while oozing slug-like down the beams upon shoggothian lower halves—for should the pier be toppled, the water swarmed with their destroyers.

These moments of multiple convergence reached their end. Whales, cephalopods, serpents, and crustacea were ramming, splintering, and climbing the embattled, tottering outpost of the shoggothoi.

Halfway up the coastal hills, Karl stood holding Meadow as they watched the demolition of that stronghold. The Great Old One came gliding up to them and hung before them on the air.

"I grieve your loss," he fluted. "She seemed both brave and brilliant."

Karl held Meadow, weeping, to his chest. "She *was* both brave and brilliant."

The Old One put in Karl's hand a glowing blue sphere. "This will warm and light you both—even in the cold above."

"You tell us that … if we return, we will not find our way down here again?"

The Old One did not answer. Somehow the inhuman eyes conveyed a smile.

MOMMA DURTT

It was a little past ten o'clock on a Friday night. Kimberly Haas, expert and easy, was riding the 580 rapids, steering a Titan northbound on that mighty freeway. Her half of the river was all ruby tail-lights, and the oncoming stream was all diamonds. *What a rush!* thought Kimberly, like riding a dinosaur—one that could do *seventy*.

She was hauling twenty-K gallons along the star-spangled rim of the San Francisco Bay, and the Bay was a *galaxy* in a space movie, this huge array of blazing lights. Black void at its center studded with islands and necklaced with bridges. Kim Haas, starship trooper …

"Hey Alex," she said to her partner, "*Starship Troopers!*"

They laughed.

This was their sixth run driving for Kleenco. Though the pickup points varied, the kind of load they hauled never did. Tonight: a pharmaceutical company in Hayward, a pesticide manufacturer in Emeryville, and a plastics plant in Oakland: solvents, sludges, and still-bottoms. A witches' brew of industrial chemistry.

"Let's get a brewski," Kim said. "We're almost there."

"I dunno. We're almost late now, and Chip seemed *really* pissed."

"Yeah, but he's *always* pissed. And we're always gonna *be* late!" Kim, though in her early twenties, was already tired of men's pre-wired predictable hissy-fits. "We're always gonna be late, because he never gives us enough time, and because while we're pickin' up there's always some holdup or other in loading this shit at three or four different places every night!"

Alex nodded, staring at the highway and feeling his own doubts about this easy money they'd been amazed to fall into these last few weeks. Brooding on the river of lights, he said, "True that. But he did make a really big point of it tonight, comin straight back."

Kim looked at him with his new Zapata 'stache—still a bit thin as yet—and thought that she still liked him just as she had in high school. Basically a nice guy, a bit touchy sometimes. She was a white country kid whose dad had driven big rigs for the vineyards, Alex a brown country kid whose several uncles *still* drove truck back in Mexico. Since high school neither of

them had done anything even close to as cool as driving this tanker. Kim had clerked at the Circle K and Alex had rented out scaffolding and weed-whackers for Action Rents.

And look at them right now: piloting this beautiful beast over the colossal crooked frame of the Richmond Bridge, cruising like a star-liner above the red-and-white river of traffic, the whole Bay encircling them with galactic scenery out of some sci-fi flick.

Kim didn't *want* to have any reservations about this totally cool job. But there was a side to it that nagged at her.

"Toxics," she said, as if trying the word out. Then a little more forcefully, "That's why he's always so uptight. All this is illegal." She waited uneasy, hanging that one out there. It had gone five nights unspoken, but now they'd said it, their unseen passenger, the truth.

He tossed it back: "Well *duuuhhh!* But look. Hey. Let's *get* a brewski. He sleeps up there, what's a few minutes? If he wants us on time, he's gotta *give* us more time."

They were just south of Petaluma, and Kim eased the rig down an off-ramp, steering the big tanker rocking and squeaking through dark streets to where a liquor store was the only thing alive for blocks around. They left the truck idling, and jumped down.

The store's neon shed a sick greenish light on the pavement. The sidewalks were eerily empty.

No. There was someone sitting on the dark curb just beyond the store. Someone *big* struggling to his feet … *her* feet? Yes. A bulky bag-lady in multi-layered shabby clothes.

Odd, how slowly she rose up, like a gradually inflating balloon of dirty rags. The two of them found themselves turning toward her, watching her rise. Then, just as they caught themselves and began to turn away from her, she moved with sudden energy, shambling crabwise, surprisingly quick for her great size, and intercepted them before they reached the store's entry.

Her face was swollen and crusted with dirt, and her breath gusted cold and vile from her wide, loose mouth. They shifted to steer around her, but her bigness seemed somehow to slow down their movements, as if she exerted a kind of gravitational pull.

"Drink up, kids!" she hissed, and thrust out a bottle at them. Kim received it, and felt its cold in her palm. The huge derelict winked at them. A dizzying chemical whiff, like a still-bottom, came off of her.

Then she pulled her own bottle from her rags, winked again, hoisted it, and drank. She drank obscenely. Her flabby throat working up and down, her dirty jowls quivering, her scabby eyes squeezed shut in the bliss of guzzling.

Kim, flustered, stammered some thanks for the beer as they retreated and hustled away from the hulk. When she looked at the bottle in the light of the store's entry, she was surprised to find it perfectly clean and new looking—*Great Old Ones Ale*, in gold Gothic lettering, arched across its label.

"What was that all about?" muttered Alex as they hustled into the store. At the counter, a wino was ahead of them puzzling out his pennies and dimes, and when, at last, they came out with the sixer, the huge, eerie lurker was gone.

They got back in the cab … back on the freeway, both silent until Alex said "Man! She smelled like …" They both sat trying to put it precisely.

And groped for it untill Kim said, "She smelled like the kinda shit we truck."

"That's it," said Alex. And they shared a moment of strange self-consciousness about this grand rig they were so jazzed about piloting. Here was their tanker, huge, towering above the traffic, rolling down the public highway, heavy with high-caliber toxins. High, wide and handsome their tanker cruised up 101.

Alex cracked a beer.

Kim looked doubtfully at the bottle of *Great Old Ones Ale.* "These micro-breweries and their weird-ass names. No way I'm drinkin it," and took one of theirs instead.

Kim swung them off 101, and now they rolled down a narrower highway through darker countryside. Sleeping orchards, a few vineyards, some country houses slid past them under the silver moon.

She geared their rig up through the switchbacks of the hills, the oaks gestured in the sweep of their lights. The big truck's headlights set all those crooked trees slow-dancing with their crooked shadows. Gaps here and there showed the young truckers fragments of the jeweled Santa Marta plain below and behind them.

"You gotta meet my auntie," Alex said, scanning that view. "She's like half Miwok or something. Anyway, she told me this mountain the mine's in was like a Spirit Place—like where you go to fast and have visions? Go to, like, face your demons and stuff."

“Spirits! Rad. I wish there *was* something cool like that about it, Alex, that would be something, but I think what these guys are doing up here is just plain old creepy and criminal.”

“Yeah, but we don’t really know that, not for sure. Anyway, we’re definitely good and late now. Maybe he’s just gonna fire us. When Chip said get back on time, he put a lot into it.”

“I think he sounded scared,” Kim said hauling on the wheel.

“He just doesn’t wanna stay late.”

“Whaddya mean *late?* He sleeps up there at the mine! What does he care?”

“He just doesn’t like to wait up for us. He wants to go to *bed*.” Alex turned his face away, irritated.

“Maybe, but *I* got the feeling he’s got company coming that he doesn’t want us to meet.”

“Where the hell do you get that idea?”

She mimicked Chip’s scoldings. “‘I wancha here, downloaded, an *outta* here by eleven thirty! For once! Can ya manage it?’ Why else would he be so pissed? He’s scared.”

Three quarters up the hill, the road mounted a broad shoulder of the mountain, and halfway out across that shoulder was the gated compound of the Quicksilver Mine. Through gaps in the treeline, fragments of Santa Marta’s jeweled plain glittered here and there below and behind them.

Chip was already rolling the cyclone gate back. Their headlights latticed his scrawny little body in the chain-links’ shadows as the gate slid aside from in front of him. He had his rubber boots and rubber apron on, and his respirator was hanging by its straps from his skinny old neck. They pulled in and he stomped over, mounted the step-up, and thrust his head in Kim’s window.

“You goddamn kids think you signed on for a day at the beach?”

Very pissed. His back-sloped forehead suggested some browless animal, maybe a possum. “I can’t believe you come a half hour late after what I told you! You two swing your ass up there, you *squirt*, an’ you *leave!*”

At the hill’s crest was the mouth of the Quicksilver’s shaft, breathing out the white light of arc-lamps at the stars. Down near the gate was the office trailer, and beyond that was a sizeable pyramid of disposal drums five tiers high, with just enough moonlight on them to sketch their rims and bulges. It had been explained to both young drivers that these were filled inside the

shaft from the holding tank, and then conveyed down the tracks in the ore carts left over from the mercury mining days. Much farther below, the drums were stacked securely in storage adits carved from the shaft walls.

The only part of this process that Kim and Alex had ever seen was the offload hose snaking from their tanker up through the mouth of the shaft, as they sat idling and running their offload pump.

Initially they'd thought, "Great, an environmentally correct operation!" But somewhere in the course of delivering a hundred thousand gallons, they'd noted that the great pyramid of drums had never altered its outline. It suggested to Kim one of those old jungle ruins, moonlit and auraed with ancient evil, erected for strange gods and human sacrifice, left over from the Mayas or the Incas.

Chip, radiating anger and impatience, clung to the door of the cab as Kim backed the tanker up to within thirty yards of the shaft-mouth. There, he jumped down and hurried inside the shaft, pulling his mask on, to re-emerge a moment later dragging the fill-hose.

Was there any possibility this hose did fill a holding tank inside …? Naw. They were just squirting all this black poison straight into the shaft, to soak into the naked earth. Chip's gnomish fury, and his expression of disgust, proved that if nothing else did.

"… just can't *believe* you kids! Unship your out-take!"

Chip helped them couple the fill-hose to the tanker's offload spout and switch the pump on. "I got *people* comin," he told them. "You squirt your goddam load, you uncouple, an you drive the fuck outta here. Can ya do that? Can ya manage it?"

He stomped back down to the office trailer.

They sat in the cab, a couple of scolded kids. "Just tell me straight," Kim said grimly. "Do you think Chip's just a really grouchy old man, or do you think he's afraid?"

"OK. How I heard about this job was my cousin Nolo, who was drivin for these guys. He left real sudden down to L.A., but I got him to give me their number before he went, couldn't believe he was dumping a gig like this. Now maybe I'm thinking Nolo got it right."

Over the sound of their offload pump they heard a vehicle coming up the highway. Headlights swung in through the gate. A big dark van stood idling there.

Chip hustled out of the office and stood by the van's driver's side. He was talking to the driver, a slight cringe in his posture. He made a gesture toward the tanker, seeming to dismiss it, to be explaining something.

The tanker's offload pump cut off. Kim and Alex got out right smartly, eager to be gone before they met whoever had just driven that van in. They uncoupled their offload spout, coiled it back onto its rack, and got back into the cab. They were hurrying to the max, while at the same time trying to seem casual.

But before Kim could slip the tanker into gear, the dark van rolled forward, climbing right up into their headlights. It seemed to intend coming bumper-to-bumper with them, but just a few yards away from them it swung right, showing them its glossy black flank, and idled there, its driver's head profiled in the tanker's lights.

The driver turned his head and faced them directly, deliberately giving them his face, faintly smiling. A startling face, its features finely chiseled. For several slow beats he blocked them there, staring. Then he slipped his brake and eased his van slowly up to the shaft-mouth.

Kim steered the tanker down the slope and into its slot beside the office. They jumped out and hustled down to Alex's old Chevy pickup. Usually Kim felt the contrast, felt diminished switching the big rig for her or Alex's four-wheeler. But tonight the pickup felt light and frisky, a godsend like an escape pod from a big spaceship that was blowing up.

Alex took the curves fast, and that was fine with Kim.

"What was that look?" he said. "Like he was showing us his face."

"No," Kim replied, her eyes fiercely fixed on the road. "He was looking through our headlights, trying to see our faces."

"How could he see anything?" Alex asked.

"You see his eyes? I almost think he could see us *through* our headlights. That was one spooky guy. You know what? Money or no money, maybe I don't think I wanna keep working here, much as I love driving this rig."

"Me either."

She glanced at him gratefully. "The thing is, I quit Circle-K and I'm seriously broke."

Alex gave her his hey-girl smile. "Check this out. I gotta friend I can move in with practically for free, an you could come too."

"Wow, thanks, but just friends, OK?"

“C’mon, gimme some credit. But hey, you wanna go out tonight? The Red Elvises are at the Phoenix.”

“No shit?” They cracked two beers from the after-work sixer they kept in whichever ride had brought them up to work at the mine. The old pickup dove down toward the lamp-starred Santa Marta plain as they talked music.

- - -

Sol Lazarian parked his van well downslope of the shaft-mouth, so his soldiers would have to climb a bit with their burdens before carrying them down into the shaft. It was tricky footing down there, and he wanted them warmed up for the work.

Lazarian smilingly thought of tonight’s task as “compounding the assets” of his employer, Lou Bonifacio of New Jersey: they were putting two of Bonifacio’s dead enemies inside one of Bonifacio’s toxic dumps in California.

Rather than seem to hide his face, Lazarian had given the drivers of that tanker a good look at it. A couple of kids—a girl and a young man. They’d brought, like him, their offering to this place. Had they felt its aura?

Sol thought that unlikely. He himself had frightened them, as he’d meant to do, but they, being young, had probably not sensed the terrible magic of this ground.

The driver before them, an older Latino, had perhaps sensed it and quit. The driver before *him* was still here down in the shaft, where Sol had put him. He hadn’t sensed anything. He had just been running his mouth of an evening in the tavern he favored.

Sol shouldered the heavier of the two body-bags and led briskly upslope with it. His two helpers were slower off the mark. Big, bearded Junior Lee had the two satchels of weights. Sonny Beasely—almost as big as Junior Lee, but an edgier guy with acne-scarred cheeks—had the lighter body-bag.

“Look at ’im,” muttered Junior, impressed. “That sumbitch musta gone two-forty at least,” referring to the corpse Lazarian toted so lightly. Trudging up after, the pair watched the big man—so light of foot—leave them farther and farther behind.

Sonny grunted, low-voiced. “Don’t it seem strange doin this? Fuckin *ocean’s* just five miles west.”

“Said we’re goin way down in.”

“So someone *else* could just walk way down in and *find* these stiffs there!”

“Maybe were gonna *bury* em down there.”

“If we’re gonna *bury* em, we could bury em just as deep up in these hills, without goin’ *down* in a fuckin’ mineshaft.”

They saved their breath for the rest of the climb. Waiting above them, Lazarian stood back-lit by the shaft. His dreamy smile was invisible to them as he watched them come. Their faces were a quarter-turned to each other as they climbed, trading doubts perhaps, showing brief profiles of effort and unease.

Did these two simpletons feel the power here? Yes, rudimentary though their spirits were, Lazarian read in their eyes that they felt it as they came up and faced the shaft-mouth. Uneasily they registered the aura of that big, dark gullet.

Click. The image of them in this instant, strobed in his mind’s eye, the way they looked right now in their moment of uneasy conference, repeating, repeating as if his visual cortex was a projector whose sprocket gear was slipping. When younger, these little epiphanies had unnerved him. Now he knew them to be a kind of signature radiation that his prey emitted as they neared death—like that given off by particles that were swallowed in a Black Hole.

“You need a breather?” Sol asked when they joined him up in the lip of the shaft-mouth.

“No! (*gasp*) Good to go!”

“No way, Sol!”

“OK. So let’s pop on the masks, guys!” said genial Sol.

They all three set down their burdens and put on their masks, respirators with complex double filters that looked like the mouth-parts of insects. Even before entering, just standing here in the shaft’s mouth the air was awesome. Sonny and Junior gaped at each other as they struggled with their straps. The vapors were a waft of pure uncanniness, moving through their brain-cells like the creepy fore-tremors of a major acid high.

Sol Lazarian was no less awed than they were. It was a reek so potent it became deafening, a pandemonium of stenches impacting the mind like a chorus of shrieking angels, a mob of divine sopranos gone mad.

His soldiers, watching Lazarian put his mask on, felt an identical little chill.

The big man’s beauty was always a little unbelievable seen up close: the carven features, the rosebud mouth, the heavy-lidded eyes two pools of

luminous candor. Shocking, though, when half that face was holstered in the mask, and you felt no mismatch between those lovely eyes and what looked like the jaws of a huge bug.

“Man, this air is messin me up, Sol,” Sonny croaked through the crude amplifier. “You could sell it to junkies.”

“Relax.” Lazarian’s voice came out mellow, almost unmangled by the mask. “Breathing through your filters, you’ll be fine. And listen: Count your steps going down. We think the guy running this place for us is ripping us off, taking other deliveries on the side. So count your steps down so we can check the fill-level.”

He doubted his laborers could show the concentration for a count. His real aim was to create a pretext for leaving them down there while he went back up for the weights and bags he was going to use on them in their turn. They took up their burdens and lanterns again, and he led them down into the shaft of the old Quicksilver Mine.

Here in the well-lit shaft-mouth they were in a stage-set. There was a holding tank for delivered toxins, and a little stack of empty drums to be filled from that tank. There was a donkey engine mounted on the track, and some carts linked to it by cable—everything needful for lowering sealed drums of toxins carefully into the shaft for cleanly storage.

But sixty yards down, the rails gave out, recycled long ago for their steel. Below that point, as they pushed their bubble of light down the steepening pitch, there was only the black, six-inch fill-hose running along down the shaft floor beside a crude staircase of rail-less cross-ties. And as they descended, their lanterns’ light made the hose’s shadow twitch and shift, like a giant house-snake, the resident genius of this place dancing down shaft beside them.

Ever deeper they sank down through a strange, ethereal inferno. Down here it wasn’t the men who sweated out into the air, but the air that sweated itself into the men, air like dragon’s breath, a micro-blizzard of molecular razors, and the brew that exhaled it was perhaps the perfect human solvent.

At this thought Lazarian’s smile bloomed within his mask, a secret flower.

Even sooner than Lazarian had expected, they reached the black pool. It was always a shock encountering it. Its stillness seemed to mask a secret aggression, as if this slug of earth-socketed poison—more than a mile in depth—had stealthily been hastening up to meet them, and had, just an

instant ago, paused, pretending immobility, its flat black eye dazzling their lights back at them, its cold breath licking the skin of their faces like a demon's caustic tongue.

Oh, there was great power here. He had not been wrong to cross a continent with these corpses expressly to offer them here. This pool was Death's most absolute orifice, the threshold of a perfect annihilation.

He watched his soldiers awkwardly crouching, unlimbering wire, cutters, and weights from the satchels. Their dazed unease was understandable, entering this place for the first time. Even these morons sensed what was here.

"So what was your count, guys?" he asked them. Smiled again within his mask to see their eyes' identical looks of guilty alarm.

It made him wonder: were such crude life-forms as these an *insult* if offered in sacrifice?

To the Power that he had from the first felt to be hidden in this shaft, were two such primitive souls worse than no sacrifice at all? Come to that, were even the slightly more intelligent, slightly more dangerous men inside the body bags also too crude, too worthless an offering?

How could he know? On the threshold of such a Mystery as Lazarian sensed down here, who *did* know the rules? In the end, his own instinctive sense of a presence, his Awe—that was the real offering. His soul's readiness was the incense he burnt on the altar. The sacrifices themselves must always be guesswork, mere gesture. They displayed his devotion, whether or not the god here valued them.

Granting all this, it was Lazarian's intuition that told him he did right. Every life, however simple, in passing through Death's membrane, forced open a seam between the space-time of this world and the unknowable Outside. Every death created a brief aperture through which something might be glimpsed.

"Never mind, guys," Lazarian said. "I kept count. They're overfilled." He pulled two fat packets of hundred-dollar bills from his pocket and waggled them. "I know how neat and tight your wiring's going to be, so I want you to take your bonuses now." Their eyes crinkled above their masks—so pleased, pocketing the cash!

And Lazarian *would* send them into the pool with their money still in pocket. Like grave-goods in the ancient world's funerals, it was a

ceremonial responsibility. Death would reveal nothing to those who tried to get revelation for a bargain.

He told the men, “I’m going up to talk to the gate-man. Weight them heavy. I’ll be back down before you get both of them wired.”

Long minutes later, though they could no longer see Lazarian’s ascending light, Sonny’s voice was still cautiously low:

“You believe this stench?”

Junior—slightly dazed, his eyes goggled—shook his head. He was looping wire around the middle of the smaller of the two bodies and threading the wire through a ten-pound weight-disc. “Fuckin *smell* feels like it’s leakin in through my skin!”

Their mask-muted voices rang strange to them, like buried men speaking from their graves. “Lift ’im a little higher,” Junior said, as he threaded the wire through another weight.

The gaseous air lay like a lubricant mist on everything. The disc slipped from his grip. It rolled, bounced off a lower tie, and jumped into the pool. The pair recoiled to either side from the tongue of black slop thrown back from the splash.

“You dip-stick!”

“It slipped! Shoot me!”

“*Don’t* slip!”

The booming of their angry voices suddenly subdued them. The after-splash of the weight into the pool made the pond gently vibrate and its rim kiss the walls of the shaft:

Slap-suck, *slap*-suck …

The echoes took forever to die down. It seemed to Sonny a long time that they crouched there, listening. He wondered if the air was stoning him, messing with his time sense. He was crouched there, meaning to get back to work, but not doing it.

It was Junior who got them moving.

“Tilt ’im up again.”

They got back into it. Sonny manipulated the corpse while Junior paid off the wire. “They were so *stiff* when we loaded em,” Junior said. “They’re a bitch to handle all floppy like this!”

They’d crossed the country in a little under forty-eight hours. The corpses were stiff to start with, but now that rigor would have been useful, it was long gone. The slack stiff slumped, resisting their work.

Now that they had the third wire loop pinching into its bagged length, it had begun to look segmented, like a caterpillar.

Sonny remembered a book about Houdini he'd read in slam and thought of something funny. He weighed his words. You had to be careful, if you wanted Junior to understand something.

"Hey, Joon. You know that when you tie a guy in a buncha short lengths like this? Instead of tyin' him in one long piece? You tie him in short lengths like this, and it's harder for him to get out of. You know—free himself, *escape*."

Bug-muzzled Junior sat goggle-eyed, staring at him. With just his eyes showing like this he looked … shocked at what Sonny had said. Wasn't getting the joke at all.

Sonny pulled down his mask a little to show Junior he was smiling, making a joke. "You know—get himself untied?"

Junior's brow corrugated. Really concentrating now and still not getting it. With his forehead corrugated like that, he looked almost terrified, as if these stiffs might suddenly try to untie themselves.

"You fuckin idiot," Sonny said, and then couldn't help laughing at that face of Junior's. "It's a *joke!* How're they gonna escape? They're fuckin *dead!"*

And then both of them looked for a moment at the bagged stiffs—as if they hadn't quite fully grasped that fact before.

They worked on. They said nothing more, but their least movements wove fine webs of echo around them.

The last weight was wired. Stiff Number One was now a black caterpillar of seven unequal segments, with the discs attached to it like the eggs of some parasitic wasp.

Sonny thumbed out the razor tip of a utility knife and cut the "window" Sol had prescribed—a big square flap out of the bag over the stiff's face—to let the solvents in to work on the nude corpse. As he cut, he felt the blade meet doughy resistance, and when he unmasked the face found a deep, unbleeding slice beside the nose.

"Sorry about that, wise guy."

"Who do ya think he was?" asked Junior.

"An East-Coast greaseball like the other one. Who cares?" He and Junior had staged a hold-up in an Italian restaurant, which distraction had covered Lazarian's abduction of this guy from a back table.

Corpse Number Two had required the pair to enter the lobby of a plush high-rise and kick up a drunken fuss about being admitted to the elevators up to “Lulu’s” condo. Four really big guys, armed, had poured from the elevator a moment later. Though the two bikers tried to prolong the distraction, they were thrown out on their ass PDQ, but Lazarian still had the big stiff in the van by the time they returned to it. Guy was wearing sweat-stained exercise togs, apparently had been having a workout in his home gym.

“You come a long way, Bo-seephus,” Sonny told Stiff Number One. To Junior he said, “Why the hell did he take us all the way out *there* to get these guys, then bring them all the way back *here* to get rid of em?”

Junior shrugged mountainously. “Who knows? He’s a goon, got his goon reasons. I mean, this is a pretty good hidin place.”

“Yeah, but between here an *Jersey* there’s three thousand miles of—”

“What’s that?”

Slap-suck, *slap*-suck, *slap*-suck …

The pool was quaking again, still gently, but just a little stronger than before. Both men were lifelong Californians, but now they were discovering that a casual attitude about earthquakes decreased radically as the depth of your body under the earth increased.

“The stuff probably just keeps settling,” said Sonny. “Down into cracks an holes down there.”

“I don’t see no bubbles.” The cogency of this remark, coming from his slow-witted friend, irritated Sonny.

“OK, OK. So whaddya say we just quit fuckin the dog, Joon? You get that end, I’ll get this end.”

They stood up with the corpse hammocked between them.

“One … two …”—they had a fair swing going—“three!”

The dead goon was launched. He lay face-up on the air for a moment. Framed in the “window” they’d cut, his eyes and mouth were pools of shadow in the oblique light from the lanterns. The shadows made the face live in that instant—it seemed to grimace as it fell.

It had to be this druggy air that made them both so late in jumping back—the splash was *big* and it wet their boots and spattered the lanterns.

Cursing, they wiped their boots on their jeans and set the lanterns higher up. Would the pond never settle? Jittering and splashing and slopping … They stood watching that turbulence and imagining the wise guy’s journey

down the steep shaft, a long slo-mo tumble down through the most perfect blackness there ever was. …

“How far down you think he’ll go?” rumbled Junior.

Sonny understood exactly what Junior was picturing: the weighted mummy sinking, striking the shaft-floor a little farther down, jouncing up off the ties, tumbling slowly farther down, jouncing again.

They both looked up behind them at the tunnel’s steep pitch. Sonny rumbled, “If the slope don’t change he’ll just keep jouncing’ down.”

“So how far down’s this tunnel go?”

“It’s called a shaft, Joon. Tunnels you can come out the other end of.”

“So how far down’s this *shaft* go?”

“Well …” Sonny’s mind kept jouncing down deeper and deeper with the corpse, and saw no end to it. “How should *I* know!?”

It was funny how they kept freezing up and *listening* down here. And now they’d done it again, just crouching there, the silence deepening around them.

“Know what I think, Sonny?” Junior’s eyes had a look in them that Sonny had never seen before. It was like … *amazement*. “I think that this is some strange shit for us to be doin down here.”

This declaration flashed Sonny on some of the other strange things they had done as “soldiers.” He considered these, and then he nodded. “I think this is the strangest shit we’ve done yet.”

“An the hardest work too.”

They roused themselves and started wiring Stiff Number Two. Heavier though it was, they were working more smoothly now—suddenly almost deft. Perhaps it was that they both felt a new tension in the shaft, felt the presence of something that seemed to applaud their work, to will it forward.

“Jesus!” Junior yelped, dropping a weight and his pliers. A roiling sound, a silken fizzing filled the shaft. The pool was foaming, bulging upwards at its center, mounting in a dome of turbulence, rising as if lifted by some powerful under-pressure.

Had the respirators melted from their faces? It felt as if the poisoned air had suddenly soaked through their skulls, and was licking the brain-meat out of them. The pressure-dome mushroomed to the ceiling and came surging at them.

They turned to launch themselves up-shaft and tripped over the half-wired second body. Got up and scrambled past it, a voice in Sonny’s skull

saying: *One heartbeat too late*. They were just getting their stride on the ties, the lighter Sonny taking the lead, as the gust of the black wave's air-pressure touched their napes.

The wave punched Sonny's legs out from under him, gripped his waist like a cold, melting hand, and dragged him back down. He rammed desperate knees against the stone, felt bone crack and his fingernails torn off, but held on against the terrible back-drag of caustics draining off of him.

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw that Junior Lee had been dragged all the way down and now was up to his neck in the pool, his arms scrabbling for the shaft floor just out of reach. And there, just beyond Junior, Sonny saw what *stood up* from the pool, saw its hugeness and the wild night-black glare of its eyes. Awed, Sonny watched it seize Junior by the back of the neck and lift him up like a kitten and, with its free hand, hugely fisted, smite the pool, to send a second, mightier wave booming up the shaft straight at Sonny.

Again Sonny scrambled up-shaft, his knee broken but fighting himself up one tie higher, another tie, another … while a voice in his head was saying: *Just one heartbeat too late.*

A tongue of waste shot past him along the shaft wall, and as he reached the lanterns, the wave curved around just beyond them and came sweeping back down toward him like a gathering arm. For an instant the lanterns made a black mirror of the oncoming liquid wall, and in it Sonny saw himself: a bug-mouthed being on its belly and reaching for a lantern, its eyes bulging at its oncoming end.

The descending wave's satin mass wrapped him in blindness, flipped him on his back, and snatched him down, the stepped earth under him beating him, braining him, blotting him out. A perfect blackness was the aftermath. The echoes of uproar and choked-off shouts collided again and again with the stone walls, subsiding at long last to a faint liquid chuckle.

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Shortly after, there came down the sound of a heavy tread descending the shaft from the far, faint circle of moonlit sky high above.

Sol Lazarian stopped at the limit of the drenched zone, which now extended fifteen yards up-shaft of the pool itself. Not a sign of his soldiers remained, nor any sign of the two bagged dead they'd carried.

Fear, in Lazarian, was a darker shade of joy, it was the same radiation at a different frequency. When he broke a man's life in his arms, his prey's shock was his joy's fuel. And, when any horror laid its hand on him, he felt not crushed, but light, combustible, packed like dynamite with a savage sympathy for that larger joy, that joy more monstrous than his own, that might be about to consume him.

Already at thirty-eight, young for a real master, he had consumed a dozen other first-rate killers. Real samurai like himself, not moronic buttons—of those he kept no count. And all these gifted men had learned that to endanger Lazarian was to inspire and ignite him. His startling face got eerily prettier, his manner even more serene. You had him distracted. You watched him fail to spot your trap. You sprang it on him, and suddenly there was Sol Lazarian's forearm across your throat and Sol Lazarian's mellow baritone crooning unspeakabilities in your ear … and there was your neck breaking.

He stood thoughtful for a moment, ears straining.

Ta-da-dum

Ta-da

Ta-dum, *da* …

In the spectrum of things audible there is a doubtful zone shared by that which is imagined and that which is faintly *heard*.

If real, this voice was beautiful and sad. A velvet-and-molasses gospel voice. It gave him a delicate attack of the creeps, a horripilation of the fine black lanugo that covered the back and shoulders of the pale giant, and that no living man had ever seen.

Ta-da-dum

Ta-da

Ta-dum, da …

Sol thrust his light further forward seeking some purchase on what he'd heard, and the movement of his light revealed that the blackness under his feet was a shape, not a blot. Something distinctly outlined in the stone and timber. His hair stirred. Its outline was precisely that of a huge, outreached hand.

Lazarian stood squarely in the palm of that hand.

You are mine, it said.

Give me more, it said …

Yes, it demanded more, as plain as printed speech. Demanded more.

- - -

Not many nights later Sol Lazarian had fetched another body from New Jersey, this one still living, though snugly bound: Lou Bonifacio.

Accomplishing this had been no slight feat.

Lazarian had had to kill no fewer than four buttons in swift succession—and quite good samurai they had been; two of them, anyway, so good Sol had for some moments considered bringing one—or even both of their bodies—back as additional offerings to the shaft.

But after all, the capture and sacrifice of his Capo must rightly claim his sole attention. To kill one whom he had served was an act of great spiritual weight.

Coming west, the securely bound Bonifacio had dozed for a long stretch of hours—an aging body, perhaps subconsciously fleeing its dire predicament. But he came awake again as their van climbed the switchbacks toward the Quicksilver Mine.

He was gagged. Lazarian had been driven to gag him not long after their journey's outset. Lou's abusive raging had quickly exhausted Lazarian's intention to be courteous and sociable on the long drive west. Now, even after so long at the wheel, Lazarian had never felt more awake. His heart rose in him while his van, turn by turn, ascended the switchbacks.

He drove rapt, so clearly recalling it—the black hand perfectly articulated, telling him whose Hand he stood in.

But *whose?*

Who but the one he'd lived and worked to meet? It was the hand of Annihilation itself, standing up and reaching out. The whole world had altered in answer to his sacrifice of those two goons! The spirit in the shaft had seized both his kills and his hirelings, obliterated the four of them, and left for Lazarian an urgent sign, the extended hand that said *GIVE MORE*.

Very soon now he was going to learn what he would purchase with this more powerful offering. A full-fledged Capo plucked right from his fortress.

In that moment of his first offering's acceptance, his spirit had been enlarged, as if he had fed *himself* those lesser lives.

The odd thing was, that it was to Bonifacio himself that Lazarian wanted to talk about it, his Capo, a man who had himself offered human sacrifices. Who better able to provide a judgment of the eerie rightness of this shaft, the Dantean poetry of its deeps? It was to Lou he longed to confide that he

found dread here too. For he did not know how much this black hand offered, and how much more it might *demand*.

If only they could toss it back and forth, as they had on other, no less homicidal excursions during their long shared past. He smiled wistfully. *Honestly, whaddya think, Lou? I think you have to agree: apart from it being a really secure site, your life will unlock something big down here. Down here your life will buy me some kind of real power … doncha think?*

Lazarian steered through the last switchback and out onto the mountain's broad shoulder. A fragmentary moon showed them Chip sliding open the gate of the compound a moment before Lazarian's headlights splashed across him. Chip had been informed that his assistance tonight was required. He brought out a sturdy dolly. Lazarian stood the shackled Bonifacio in the dolly and bound him to it, and then hauled him up to the shaft. The shaft-mouth was wreathed in the mist of artificial light that it breathed out at the stars.

His tone gentle, Lazarian told the dollied Capo: "In plain, unvarnished English, Lou, I'm giving you to a god down in there. I don't exactly understand Her, and I don't know what She'll do with you. I sincerely hope it won't involve doing you any harm. I only want to say that in spite of my handing you over, *I* have never wished you anything but the best, Lou. And for all I really know, maybe She won't either."

As he spoke he was clipping lights to the dolly and to the bonds that bound Lou to it. Lazarian knew his little speech was disingenuous—was a false mercy of delayed revelation. Bonifacio was almost certainly going to end up in the pool.

He said, "Excuse me putting my mask on, Lou. The air down there's really intense. … There. Can you hear me OK? These things' speakers aren't so great."

Lazarian began to ease the dolly smoothly down the ties. So dance-like this kind of descent was. Very soon they were below the lighted zone and carrying their own bubble of light downshaft, utter darkness both behind and ahead of them. Softly they jolted deeper and deeper.

"I'm sorry about this dolly arrangement, Lou, but I think you'll agree it's the least painful way I can keep you both comfortable and secure."

Bonifacio was an older brute, beginning to melt down at the corners and angles of his great frame, but as Lazarian jolted him softly, steadily down

the shaft, he lay rigid in his bonds, and his gagged glare never ceased to blaze at his captor. Lazarian had to smile.

“Lou, you’re old-school in the best sense. If I hadn’t gotten the drop on you, I’m sure you’d be grinding my bones to powder right now with your teeth! It’s always a pleasure to be dealing with a professional.”

Lazarian’s great strength managed to ease down his massive cargo with a rolling smoothness, always iron-muscled in resistance to the earth’s black yawn of gravity he stepped down into.

The steadiness of his descent gave a hypnotic regularity to the shaft’s support beams, little timber stonehenges holding the earth apart, rising to swallow them at regular intervals as he stepped down, stepped down, stepped down …

Momma Durtt get you
by degreees
jus take hold
an squeeze an squeeze …

All doubt gone now, she was speaking to him.

Just to him, Lou didn’t seem to hear it. Ever so faint it sounded, far down in that darkness beyond his bubble of light. Echoey now … was he hearing it? Or was it the low commotion of his own masked breathing?

Momma Durtt get you
by degrees …

To Lazarian’s eyes, a faint aura was beginning to glow from Bonifacio’s body. There was a kind of Egyptian pomp in Lou’s big mummied mass as he floated half-recumbent down the shaft on his dolly, his eyes blazing above his mummied mouth …

And justly so, Lazarian thought, for in Lou he was sacrificing a kind of deity, one of those furious Elementals like Hades or the Midguard Serpent, brought to heel by gods in tales … he was auraed with infernal majesty. Then, far down below their light-bubble, from the perfect dark they descended to, something stirred …

A liquid sound? A soft, wet impact?

Lazarian stayed their descent and leaned near Bonifacio’s ear to say, “We’ve conjured a god here, Lou, I’m sure of it. With my own eyes I’ve seen … unbelievable evidence. We’ve conjured a *goddess*, more precisely. I’ve heard her voice, heard her *sing*.”

The bound man's eyes flared with a new shade of fear—the fear of lunacy in his captor—which Sol Lazarian saw, and had to laugh. "No! I'm not crazy, old friend. I know how that sounds, but I have heard her sing!

"And I'm afraid I have to be honest with you, Lou. I've *procured* you, you might say, *for* the goddess here." He paused in their descent, resting briefly. "But the goddess, unfortunately, lives *in* the toxics, and that seems to be where her offerings must be placed."

Silence then between them, stepping down through the last long steepness, the burdened dolly's wheels groaning.

The etheral reek swelled thicker, swallowing them like a cold reptile mouth.

And here was the pool …

Lazarian said, "I'm *offering* you, Lou—not *giving* you. Here I will stand you."

He propped the dolly upright on the lowest cross-tie above the black tarn that breathed its sharp, glacial breath in their faces. "I'm not putting you in—just putting you where she can take you. If she is as real as I think, I suppose she … *consumes* you—I don't really know. But I hope that you know how truly I regret what's what's going to happen here."

Lazarian bent and locked the dolly's wheels. He gave Bonifacio's shoulder a pat and retreated four ties upshaft of him. Crouched there, uncramping his leg muscles.

Lou was standing very carefully balanced. He was snugly bound and bandaged to the dolly, but his rage and horror made the little lights he was decorated with tremble on the black pool, which seemed to be almost as still as stone.

But no, not absolutely still. The subtlest of tremors now and then, here and there, skimmed its blackness.

Here in this grotto, this *chapel* of annihilation, Lazarian groped for the proper gesture. What did the black gulf want of him? What gesture of his must call forth the thing that hid here? Should he show his awe? His gratitude? All he could think to do was to declare his reverence. He addressed the pool.

"I give you the one who conjured you. The one who fed you the poisons that your Nullity grew from. He is your food now, a token of my reverence. In return, grant me *vision!* Grant me power in your service!"

Bonifacio was an earthy man, of strong simple appetites. Teetering on this narrow footing at the rim of nothingness, he had as firm a grip on himself as a man thus situated can have. Hearing Lazarian imploring the pool of poison like a god, the Capo knew himself to be in the hands of Lunacy incarnate, and with a wordless prayer he commended his soul to the abyss.

At which instant a huge black hand rose dripping from the pool and seized him. Its mighty grip was more than half his height, but enough of the Capo's head and shoulders protruded to show that his features were as much convulsed with fury as with fear.

The great black knuckles liquesced as they gripped him, the huge fist melting as it lofted and seemed to heft him, as if assaying value. And then, in sudden shock, it seemed to Lazarian that he himself melted, that he hung unbodied in the lethal air, because what was happening? The pool behind the huge hand began to bulge and dome up as an immense face surfaced, her wet black eyeballs (big as human heads) glaring from a thorny thicket of hair, her jeering mouth a big whirlpool slowly spreading on her face.

The goddess thrust Bonifacio into the melting cavern of her mouth, wherein the Capo's wordless roar was echoed and then drowned out as he dove—dolly and all—from sight.

She faced Lazarian, this face of hers as big as his whole body, a melting face unendingly reborn, her eyes mockingly, merrily glaring in his.

And Lazarian's soul spoke within him: *I've done it! I've broken through! Into the world of miracles!*

"You will not die," her hissing lips of poison told him, each word a wet adhesion to his flesh. "You will serve me while this world lasts, and you will sow plague and poison upon it.

"I am the miracle you have lived and labored for. Of the Great Old Ones, I am the youngest, no older than this venomed globe itself, but until Dark claims us all again, you'll till my earth and feed my monsters up to strength to work this world' destruction."

Gleeful now, her seething face, she lofted her great melting fist and brandished it upshaft, and—far, far up the echoey tube—an engine growled to life, avalanching echoes down upon them.

Lazarian found his voice hoarse with grateful joy. "I will serve you, Great One! I will serve you to the end of our time!"

The black giant grinned from her tarn. “Then let us make some *room* for your labor! Let us give scope to your service and give you the *power* to serve!”

A mighty din of fractured stone filled the shaft, as a huge convulsion shook the earth they stood in. Raining dust and gravel, the mine’s walls and ceiling heaved shuddering away from Lazarian.

And when it stilled, the shaft’s diameter had tripled, the crude-hewn stone ceiling was thrice his height above him, and the pool of poison was now a wide pond. The engine’s noise, still high and far, came echoing down more hollowly now.

“In power and style you will serve me,” the giantess leered at him. “Behold!”

Now, that distant engine’s roar dove in, and its guttural howl came snarling down before it. Rapt, Lazarian gazed up at the lofty walls of stone that contained him—high and shrine-like they were now.

Here came the tanker’s headlights blazing down from on high, its echoes a ghostly landslide that broke against him. The shaft tremored like a waking dragon around him.

He stood enraptured, unavoiding. The deep tarn was at his back, yet he stood serene as the headlights came down like comets.

Outside, far above him, under the silent sky, only a few deep dinosaur echoes welled up at the moon—some dim commotion far under the earth, but peace up here. Chip was gone—he’d taken off the moment the earth had shaken. A long and unmarred silence followed in the compound then, peace beneath the pale moon.

Until, at length, a growling began to rise from the Quicksilver’s throat, rose quickly to crescendo, and out of the earth the Tanker erupted.

It launched its hugeness arcing through the air, surged airborne twenty yards or so, until it colossally *whumped* down, ponderously tap-danced on its heavy tires, then leveled off, and hit the highway.

You could tell she was full by the sway of her, but even so she ate up the switchbacks, tires smoking down the mountain, zig and zag. And impossibly soon, she hit the cross-country straightaway toward mighty 101—a linear glow past shadowy hills and groves.

Now as she rolled through the fields her looks improved. The moonlight seemed to wipe her bulky mass clean. Her tank turned a bright polished silver, and her cab grew glossy black with silver trim.

As she surged up onto 101, she was gorgeous, all scoured steel and glossy black enamel. She rode high in the river of southbound headlights, a star-cruiser cargoed with Death for the Cities of Light that rimmed the great Bay to the south. And high in her cab, commanding the wheel, sat Lazarian, his eyes rapt on the cities of light as he hurtled toward them. He drank with gusto from the bottle of ale which he gripped in one hand.

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A week later, Alex and Kim had a window seat in a roadside diner. An on-ramp onto 101 climbed right past their window, up through a Friday night blaze of neon colors. As they gazed out the glass, a gorgeous tanker truck slid to the ramp and surged up it.

"Whoa," said Kim, "isn't that …?"

"Damn. It is."

The pair watched with awe as the great machine roared onto the freeway and geared up for points south.

UNDER THE SHELF

When at last they drew near the wall of the Ross Ice Shelf, the cloud-ceiling's vast, gray fleece had begun to shred in the wind, opening ragged islands of pale blue sky whose light lent sharper definition to the towering rampart of its rim.

Perched in the little freighter's prow, Belinda studied the titan. She mentally hefted the dimensions of this exploit. To confront the Shelf was to stand in awe. To go beneath it, as she was soon to do, would be to enter the utterly unknown.

If a couple hundred feet of that ice-shelf rose above the waves, its main bulk plunged another thousand beneath them, while the sheet as a whole roofed a vast and undiscovered tract of seafloor that was nearly the size of France. And the *depth* of that seafloor beneath it? It was believed the bottom lay between thirteen and sixteen thousand feet down.

Not that their mission here—hers and her sister's—lay nearly so deep. Their two submersibles would explore only the upper reaches of the under-sea—perhaps as deep as three hundred fathoms below the ice. There, they would hang (as it were) merely in the stratosphere of that ice-capped abyss.

If the rest of Earth's oceans were an analogue, this would be the zone thickest with life. But part of her doubted. Could anything at *all* inhabit that freezing darkness?

"Hey Melody," she called back to her sister, a little aft of her, "so what do ya think we'll meet down under there?"

"Whoa, I dunno! I just can't believe we're actually *here!*" Melody crowed.

"What did you think?" old Earl rumbled. "We couldn't find fuckin' *Antarctica?*"

The sea, black-and-jade, was littered with minor ice, a kind of loose-knit galaxy of jostling floes and fragments that gonged dully against their steel hull. The ice titan, ten times the height of their conning tower, stretched past sight to either side.

"What's that?" Melody posed this question just as Belinda was thinking it. Off their bow, perhaps three hundred yards out, something dark and

bulky bobbed in the swell—mostly submerged, but breaking surface here and there.

“Isn’t it … a carcass?” In asking, Belinda grew sure it was—something really big, nearly thirty feet long, its mottled hide feebly flashing black and silver in the wan sun.

“Reversing engine,” Earl called. “I wanna get closer. I think that’s a goddam orca. Look at the size of ’im! But hell, he oughta sink if he’s not movin’!”

They all watched it as it slowly rose and fell with the ocean’s pulse, while Earl coaxed the little ship nearer. “I just don’t understand why it’s floatin’,” he complained. “Thing’s dead, it should sink like a rock!”

As they hove nearer, Melody said, “See that? See it? There’s, like, something shiny all over it, an’ all around it too! See it?”

And they did. The dead brute presented something more than the wet sheen of whale-hide: a thin, glossy fabric seemed to envelop the huge carnivore, and the semi- transparent skirts of this fabric billowed on the water’s surface.

“Damn!”

“Whoa!” both women cried at once as Earl, backing engines, began bringing them around its other side. They saw a gaping hole in the orca’s flank, a meaty chasm some fifteen feet across.

As it slid past below their starboard rail, the carnage of that awful wound held them staring.

“What coulda done that?” Earl sounded angry, as if his sense of the possible had been outraged. “A sperm whale? That sucker’s near bit in *half*. Nothin’ attacks orcas, far as I know. A buncha big sharks maybe? … ”

All three of them stood gazing.

“I dunno,” Melody said. “Buncha sharks big enough and hungry enough to attack him in the first place, why is there so much left of him?”

Earl snorted. “*Is* there?” He’d reduced their speed but kept them under way, and as the carcass fell astern, their wake set it rocking, and its great wound tilted up more fully into the light.

“Jesus!”

“Jeez Louise!”

“Holy shit!”

The dead giant showed itself to be all but hollowed out, emptied clear up to the spine.

A silence fell on them as the corpse receded, till Melody said, “What a way to go! Gotta make you nervous, right, Sis? That killer’s a lot bigger’n our pods. Let’s hope at least he took the edge off its appetite, whatever hit him.”

The huge corpse kept drawing their eyes back as it fell astern, until the Shelf, towering nearer and nearer, commanded their attention. Its wall was becoming their world, occluding half the sky and stretching past sight to either side, with an icy breath coming off it like an invisible tidal wave. Scanning it was giving Belinda a crick in the neck.

“OK, my dears!” Earl called them back to the wheel. “I’m gonna hang out here outside this loose stuff shoulderin’ around. You stay online all the way down, all the way under, an’ all the way back. All the *way* you keep talkin’ to me. An’ soon as you come back topside, you fire your flare-gun down, even if you got me in sight. Don’t be stingy—hang a bunch up there where we can’t miss ’em. *And*—main point here!—don’t go down more’n a hundred meters beneath the shelf! I’m not kiddin’ here!”

“Lighten up!”—touchy young Melody.

“Hey! This cold water’s full of microlife, kid! There’s a big food-base here! I mean, whaddya gotta see besides a hollowed-out orca to make ya pay attention? Far as I’m concerned, we don’ know *what*-all’s down under this shelf!”

Melody didn’t like old men sermonizing. “What’s your problem? So it had to be sharks or another killer! Of course we’re gonna pay attention, but it doesn’t mean we gotta freak out.”

Earl looked hard at her, and then at Belinda. “OK. Fine. From this point on, we’re all assumin’ that all your strong lights’ll drive off anything big enough to threaten ya.”

The women gazed back at him stoically.

“All right,” Earl sighed. “Jest humor an old man an’ pleeze keep in mind that you, in point of *fact*, like I said, don’t fuckin’ know *what-all* lives down there.”

“Thanks, Earl,” Belinda blurted, anxious to forestall further blowback from her kid sister. “You’re right. There’s a lot of plankton in these waters, and that’s a huge food-base. We *don’t* know what we might find, and we *will* stay alert.”

“Yeah yeah,” said the old man, refusing reassurance. “Hey, don’ mind me! Mount up an’ dive.”

Their little subs were steel-and-glass bullets sixteen feet long, with bubble-cabs and every kind of camera God ever made mounted on the hulls. The women strapped in and sealed their hatches, switched on their blazing coronas, and dove.

The black sea surged through their shells of light, a silt of algae and microlife streaming up like smoke all around them as they plunged.

Down and down the Shelf's wall they dove: it was a vast, fissured bulwark, a colossal rampart thrust out against the Deep. Both women were rapt as they sank, filled with an identical wonder to see the wide spill of their own radiance plunging down the craggy rim of the titan…

Until, seven hundred feet down, the flood of their light suddenly and awesomely blossomed out into the perfect blackness under the ice-sheet's floor, and they beheld the immense ceiling that—endless above them from here on in—would roof their explorations like the lid of a colossal tomb.

They turned in under-shelf and leveled off beneath her.

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The Shelf's underside was, on the grand scale, roughly evened by its endless belly-slide off the Antarctic slope, but was also colossally trenched and scored by the cruel terrain it had crossed.

The women had each other's cockpits on display, and Earl shared both at his own screen topside. They all traded a look—an identical ecstasy of discovery. It bound them into a single awareness for that moment, as the two women moved untethered—free as thought—beneath the icy ceiling of a wholly undiscovered under-sea.

"It's like flying upside down," Belinda said. "Across a continent of solid ice!"

Those cracks, chasms, and valleys in the under-sheet made giant shadows of their floodlights, and the darkness in them seemed to seethe. Within its murk—far too deep for their lights to touch—it seemed that huge things hovered, gazing, brooding on the passage of their tiny, radiant vessels.

A triangular silence had fallen between them, the women below and the man above. A long silence while, as one, they watched the glacial terrain slide past overhead.

Melody found her voice. "We're fifty clicks in and two hundred meters beneath its belly. It's just … stupendous …"

Endlessly their light-spheres swept the scarred terrain above them. It seemed to both the pilots and their friend up in the freighter that they all

saw what Melody was the first to articulate: “Up in those dark canyons don’t you see, like, things *moving?* I mean, like *big* things?”

“Yes.” Belinda and Earl said it almost together.

The three of them fell silent. The silty dark they moved through had a smoky, granular texture, sluggishly billowing around them. As they advanced, their lights woke a furtive sparkle throughout that vast turbidity —pyrites, perhaps, in the sediment that the ice titan had ground down off the continent.

“What’s that?” asked Melody. “Belinda—come alongside me up here!”

The sisters’ subs hung together under … what exactly was it? Affixed to the ice above them was a long shape, a shape bigger than both their craft combined. Even in the wash of their lights there was a vagueness to it, created, they realized, by a kind of taut, shiny bandage that bound it to the shelf’s underside.

Melody’s voice sounded hushed to her sister: “Stuff’s half transparent. It’s like … webbing. It’s like that stuff on the orca.”

“Yeah … I see it. Let’s check it out.”

“Roger that.”

… “Holy shit. Is that …?”

“Another *whale* …”

“A fuckin’ sperm whale, full grown! Thing’s sixty feet long! You *readin*’ this, Earl?”

“Fuckin-A I am!” A hoarseness to his voice. “Pull back outta there now!”

The women traded a glance. “Just a bit longer,” Belinda said.

The women hung below it, edging along the giant’s flank. Though the webbing reflected much of their light, its translucence confirmed, mummied within it, the blunt, squared-off head of a sperm whale.

Hanging some fifty fathoms apart, each sister could see the other’s craft nosing its light-beam up against that giant pinioned to its icy tomb. In their beams’ convergence, it seemed some colossal spider’s prey. It struck them both that whatever had bound this brute could take both their craft at once.

Then, within its milky bindings, the whale *stirred*. Were they really seeing this? Yes. Tremors, faint but distinct, rippled across its bulk.

It couldn’t be the whale itself moving. The great buttress of its head was shrunken, corded tight against its mighty skull. Even through its gauzy sarcophagous they could see the huge beast was dead. This movement was the stirring of something *inside* it.

“We gotta look closer,” said Melody. “This is just too incredible! Imagine the *predator* that did this!”

“I am! I am!” Belinda barked, her urgency crackling in Melody’s headphones. “And we gotta fall way *back* from this, right now! I mean it, Mel!”

But neither of them made the least motion to retreat. The whale, enshrouded as it was, exerted an eerie magnetism. The bulge and tremor of its underside riveted them with awe.

“Goddamn you crazy broads! Pull way back and head topside, right now! Right the fuck back topside *now!*”

Earl was screeching a little there at the end, but neither one of the women seemed to hear him. And as he saw them onscreen gazing upward through their convergent light-beams, Earl himself had to agree that those tremors in the corpse were enthralling.

And then the huge carcass’s underside erupted: two great crooked branchlike legs covered with cruel thorns thrust out of the belly, fiercely flexing, and began to tear the carcass asunder in such a smoky storm of exploded tissue that the water around it became a cloud of blindness that enveloped both their vessels. In this murk, the shock waves of some mighty motion seized and shook both craft, and they never clearly saw what it was that erupted from the exploded giant and sped away, to leave them rocking in the blood-smoky deeps.

It seemed a long time they hung there in that fog of torn tissue, beyond awe. When they found one another’s faces on their screens, they saw identical astonishment. And in their shared disbelief they realized that a new amazement lay not very far ahead of them.

It was a great column of much paler water, of water through which *light* fell. It meant that just ahead of them there was, had to be, a fracture in the Shelf that roofed them.

Steeling themselves, they approached it: a fissure of light that clove the murky deep.

They entered it, this fissure, full two hundred meters wide, and began a slow ascent into the growing brightness. And at length, they surfaced under a pallid, frost-white sky. Floating on that surface side by side, Belinda said, “Talk topside?”

“Roger that.”

They pulled on their furs, raised the hatches, and stepped up into the little conning towers. Stood there in the raw air looking up in awe, looking up that ice-walled shaft at a strip of pallid Antarctic sky more than two hundred feet above their deep entombment.

Cruising half-speed side by side, they watched this icy grandeur unfold. Belinda asked, her voice sounding small and uncertain between these colossal ramparts, “What are those things? Those … like lumps up there on the walls?”

The gusts of sleet and snow variably veiled the cliffs so that they came in and out of focus, as if at a constant readjustment of the atmospheric lens. The women struggled to interpret what was clinging here and there to those prodigious walls, both white cliffs studded with sizeable, irregularly shaped nodes of a darker hue than the ice.

“Look at them,” Melody muttered. “What the …?”

“My God!” Belinda said. “See those like tusks on that one? See there? It’s a goddamn walrus.”

As if the word brought it into focus, the huge mummied shape was unmistakable within its glossy bonds.

And, now that their eyes had been instructed, they began discerning other shapes webbed to those high walls: a very big shark, a cephalopod even bigger whose gathered tentacles bulged like coils of suckered cable, and near that, something four-legged and almost as big … a polar bear, mummied with its jaws agape, and its fore-claws lifted for attack.

Belinda said, “Whatever this predator is, it must be huge!” They were armed. Knowing that arctic realms bred bigger fauna, they both had Thompson sub-machine guns aboard. Belinda lifted hers from its rack on her dash and held it up tentatively before her. It had seemed such a beast when she’d test-fired it, but here between these high walls, to which such giants clung entombed, it seemed a comical, slight thing.

Their boats advanced. The sheer walls began to fall away from them, lying back in more gradual slopes from the channel they cruised, until soon it was not a chasm, but a white river valley.

“Listen,” said Belinda, her eyes locked on her sister’s as they rode thirty feet apart. Her unforced voice seemed to ricochet sharply over the icy spaces. “Do you see what I see ahead there? Am I crazy? Hasn’t all that been … *built?*”

Coming abreast of what she meant, they both stood staring up that slope. Melody nodded in a dazed way. Half that whole frozen hillside seemed one vast, stepped hive, tier upon receding tier of crudely faceted cells. The cells were of a giant scale, sized to house larvae big as skiffs, and wrought of a hard-sheened substance almost as pale as the ice, but nuanced with faint color here and there like mother-of-pearl.

The cells were not so precisely shaped as those of wasp combs are. An irregularity in their faceting seemed to express a cruder instinctual energy. The sprawling structure declared a rude, Cyclopean power abroad in this white waste.

“My God,” Belinda said.

“Shit!” barked Melody, seeing then what her sister did—a colossally agile crustacean bigger than both their boats combined, a kind of huge crab of a streamlined make, narrow-thoraxed, running on six legs while holding aloft two forelegs prodigiously clawed and hinged like a mantid’s. Arcing back up from the stern of its thorax was a jointed tail tipped with the stinger-bulb of a scorpion, but the size of a wrecking-ball.

Huge and swift it came down the great comb, its legs rippling like pistons in their smooth succession. Its great weight glided across the faceted cells, leapt down onto the ice-slope, and launched from a hundred meters. Hanging on the white air above the channel with its barbed arms outreached, it landed in an explosion of brine, seized Belinda’s sub by stern and prow—and hoisted it aloft.

The giant seemed to triumph over its prey for a moment, brandishing the little sub while Belinda whiplashed in her cockpit seat, the monster flourishing near a ton of steel at the leaden sky. Then the colossal crustacean spun around and ran with it straight back up the slope, and into the vast comb of its hive.

“Stay on com!” Melody shouted into her sister’s stunned face on her screen. “Dog your hatch down—I’ll take that fucker apart!”

“Just don’t take *me* apart, OK?” Belinda’s voice was oddly absent, more amazed than galvanized. “I’ll signal if—”

Her transmission was cut off, even as Melody was grounding her prow on the glacier. She flung back her bubble and jumped out, seizing up her Tommy-gun and bag of extra magazines.

The giant had a seventy-yard lead when Melody came sprinting up after. Seeing how swiftly it ran even with its seventeen-foot burden, she dreaded

losing Belinda entirely and cut loose a burst of .45 slugs—amazing recoil!—that by wild chance took off the bottom joint of the rearmost of the brute's four left legs while her slugs sparked away on up the icy slope. The predator faltered slightly, but then ran on, Melody running up after it.

She dared not fall behind and fail to see where the thing installed Melody in the colossal comb—indeed, her sister must not *be* installed. If this seeming arthropod was at all wasplike, it would paralyze its prey when sealing it in a cell.

She fired again as she ran, not daring to send anything high enough to hit the pod, but desperately trying to catch another of its legs to slow it down.

Unhit, the thing danced nimble as a nightmare, holding her sister in her boat above it like a trophy.

And now, they were running up across the Comb itself, whose amber gloss and hexagonal patterning made it seem some colossal insect's compound eye that she crossed, her soles drumming on the waxy caps that roofed each cell, whose translucence showed the dim shape of prey within them.

Furious though her pursuit was, she kept glancing at those shapes beneath her as she ran, and some of those prisoners seemed to stir.

Or … if they were paralyzed, perhaps they were *being* stirred by the larvae devouring them.

Desperately Melody sprinted across this vast, waxen pavement, still firing bursts of the Tommy and stumbling and scrambling higher and higher. If—oh please!—she got the boat back and Melinda was unharmed, how was she going to get it back down to the channel, which was already five hundred meters below and behind her, and dropping fast as she climbed?

She could see the boat aloft in the giant's pincers; its bottom had just enough of a keel on it to cut into this snow-crowned ice. It just might *run* back down this glacier like a big sled. Its tough little rudder might even help to guide its plunge through the deeper snow on its way down to the channel. But how could you *steer* it at the speed you'd be going?

The predator was fast and untiring. Melody's legs pumped up the slope at the excruciating limit of her strength. If the thing weren't carrying the weight of that boat, she could never have hoped to keep up with its machinelike power.

Her heart was hammering at breaking point, but now here it came, the opening she'd hoped for: they reached the crest of the ice-slope just where its sharp rim had crumbled along a stretch of a few hundred meters, creating a ribbon of negotiable footing.

She was a toiling shape of sinew and bone, all flesh burnt off her. And there, the huge crustacean laid that boat upon the ice-rim and wheeled to meet her, two pairs of its jointed legs scissoring the air to take her.

Melody was no longer praying. She had *become* a prayer, her every nerve a single plea for luck.

She leapt, arms wide, in a half-blind plunge to embrace the boat, to seize their stolen survival, and she felt an instant of surprised delight at how well-aimed her lunge was. Here was her grateful body crashing against the little sub's hard hull, hugging its bubble with her every sinew and driving hard with her legs to shove both her and the boat and her sister at its wheel inside —all at once straight back down the slope, and into almost-freefall, this shrieking, racketing, rocketing plunge straight down the ice wall.

"Damn you!" she screeched to the vessel she clung to. "*Turn!*" Melody's every cell screamed it. She had to *angle* down, toward where the channel broadened to an embayment, with enough open water to receive them if she plunged slantwise toward it.

How fragile at this speed was the vehicle's grip on the ice! To force a *turn* in such a plunge seemed madness, meant tumbling death, the shattering of neck and spine. But what would it do to her to go straight down and hit the water at max acceleration?

Clenching her jaws and bidding her body a terrified goodbye, she and twisted her frame's whole length powerfully rightwards.

It torqued the whistling hull crossways so that the slight keel caught and cut a slanting course down the steep wall on a branching path. Now their slight keel was cutting a slant course down the steeps, descending at perhaps forty-five degrees off the vertical.

And now they were aimed at a farther, much broader part of the channel with room to maneuver after their high-speed impact with the water. Their destination had improved, but not their chances of surviving an impact with the water, for after just a few seconds of descent they were *rocketing* again, shrieking down at a speed that would break their bodies upon entry.

Melody pressed her boots' toes against the ice behind her, trying to brake their plunge. But, hugging the cockpit bubble with her whole body, she

couldn’t exert any leverage against the glacier speeding under them.

Clinging thus, she could not see her sister’s face, but she felt her presence right beneath her, riding this long plunge with her, the pair of them in touching distance, but powerless to touch before the impact killed them.

Melody lifted her head, letting the icy spume streaming up from the runners sting her face, fixing her eyes on the wall they plunged down, to perceive any feature that offered some natural channel to guide their plunge. The shriek of their keel seemed terror itself.

Please God, Belinda might, just might—braced inside—survive the impact, but when the boat slammed into the water that impact would tear her own grip right off the bubble and she’d hammer that water head-first. Even if it didn’t break her neck, it would surely stun her stone-cold as she knifed deep down in that freezing channel. Deep-sunk and stunned, the sudden killing weight of her drenched clothes would drag her to her death.

The boat’s keel shrieked. The sleety air flayed her ears. The corner of her eye caught big movement on the slope ahead.

The huge crustacean was racing down the steepness, impossibly swift. Its nightmare agility was an enlargement of the familiar little miracle of a spider rushing with equal ease straight up or down a wall. But this bug was big as a truck, and its descent was going to intersect with theirs.

Melody had no hope of survival if she did not jump clear of this hurtling boat, *without* jumping short and landing on the boulders below. She had to do it in the next six or seven seconds to stay on the ice shelf.

Belinda down inside the boat was screaming something up at her.

… Was she saying *hold on?*

The thought caused a tightening of Melody’s embrace of the bubble, just as the boat’s actual pilot re-took command and wrenched their prow *toward* their huge predator.

The spidery giant, its glossy black eyes on their stalks bent on them, veered more sharply to intercept and seize them. Beneath its hideous eyes its chelicera—the largest of its mouthparts—scissored like jointed scythes with its greed to take them.

“Oh shit!” shouted Melody, seeing their intersection not fifty meters off. And at that, Belinda wrenched the wheel, and they were shrieking dead for the brute.

Its crooked legs danced hard to turn and meet them, but their suddenness had thrown it off-balance. Melody, from her rooftop vantage, watched the

huge legs tilting and faltering, the monster outmaneuvered. As the mighty tail with its stingered bulb struck down on the ice behind her, they shot past its forelegs straight under it. She watched a huge claw arc down at her two seconds too late and shatter only the air with the snap of its closing.

“No!” she screamed, for instantly here came Belinda’s target looming at them: one of the brute’s *back* legs. Caught with its weight on that leg, it could not dodge the dead-on impact of the hurtling boat.

Collision, in the next nanosecond, proved to be deliverance. The leg shattered with a tree-snapping report, and their boat leapt through.

Still Belinda steered them slantwise to the killer slope and then brought them around into a counter-slant. She was switchbacking, yes! Melody glanced back upslope and saw that their impact had cost the brute half of another leg on the same side as the first amputation. Again, the machinelike predator was pistoning downslope after them, though now there was a wobble to its gait.

It came crookedly dancing down. But though at first it veered left and right, echoing its quarry, it suddenly got smart and began to make a beeline that transected their zigzags. Even damaged, it was far more stable on this steepness than its prey. Melody craned her neck back and saw with horror how quickly it gained on them.

The vast speeding slope below her, the channel still so far, the predator huge and tireless and hungry—the physics of their situation struck Melody’s heart like a sledge.

They swung into another giddy switchback, and as they streaked slantwise down again, the relentless arthropod came down in a leap, the cage of its crooked legs striking the ice in a spray of fragments that echoed on their hull even above the roar of their keel and the wind.

The huge predator on its straight plunge would surely intersect them on the next switchback. Melody screamed, “Break another leg when it jumps us!” Through the dark polarized bubble she could just see Belinda’s head nod.

The shriek of their hull was a demon’s song, while the wild winds flung swarms of sleet and snow, drenching them with a light now pallid and now blazing white. A surge of wind came booming down the channel that they plunged to. They could see where this chasm in the Shelf narrowed back to the slender but ample channel they had entered by.

Another switchback, shrieking leftward down it, and below this, the last long plunge cross-slope to the wider stretch of water where their other boat waited.

Could this boat survive impact? Would it break up? Would it ship too much water and go straight down?

Belinda threw her last switchback, and there was their final plunge ahead of them, five hundred meters down the ice-face to the embayment she had targeted. Melody embraced the bubble passionately.

A huge mass overleapt them. She felt the atmospheric bow-wave of a soaring giant, and then—as Belinda veered their boat and Melody held on for dear life, every joint crackling—the legs came down like jointed trees of some skeleton forest sudden-planted dead ahead.

Through the wind-shriek Melody heard a dull boom from the cockpit under her—two beats. She took that muffled bellow to be Belinda telling her to hold on. What else could she do up here? They plunged like a bomb straight for that thicket of crooked huge legs.

Belinda had decided to dodge past those legs, right? But in an instant she knew otherwise. They thrust right *into* them, missing a front leg by a hair but plunging at a hind one.

The whole bottom joint of that leg blew to splinters as their boat burst through it. One piece slammed down on Melody's shoulders as it streaked past her, knocking out her breath, but she held on. She looked back at the huge bug.

Though some of its legs were out of commission, it was still moving, turning around and springing down after them, but its pursuit was more staggery. They could beat it to the bottom.

Below them the channel looked like a band of steel. The smooth sweep of the ice down to its shore was broken by frosty black rocks jutting up through it for the last hundred meters of its descent. If they couldn't slow down …

And then she shrieked a question, knowing Belinda couldn't hear it. "What the fuck is that?"

For all their switchbacking, the channel was much closer now—they could see the texture of the water, see the sculpting of the ice walls, seamed and graven by the sea.

And see something else. Something big, moving just under the water, creating a turgid zone out in the channel.

In a ceaseless wail of metal-torn ice, Melody and Belinda under her plunged down the steeps, Melody a limpet on the shrieking vehicle.

She screamed—at what was erupting from the channel they plunged toward. A big knot of unrest began to roil the water. A sinewy disturbance grew, the cold sea writhing in a boil of greenish-black tentacles.

Even in the adrenalized distress of their plunge, the *size* of that stir crackled up and down Melody's spine, and then she saw the body of what thrust those tentacles up toward *them*.

This huge, mossy fuselage had, near its crown, a colossal eye like an eerie, pallid target. Both women could see this orb, half submerged in the channel, turn its hugeness fractionally and focus precisely on them.

A pair of the tentacles came snaking up the slope to meet their rocketing plunge. Evasion seemed as impossible as in nightmares—the tentacles' tips broadened into suckered pads of a size to seize their sub right off the ice.

But suddenly, it seemed that it was their huge pursuer that had captured that titan's attention. Those benthic arms thrust past them and gripped their crook-legged pursuer while, down in the channel, the snake-limbed titan regarded them with so huge an eye: a colossus of alien sentience.

It raised the captured beast aloft and snatched it down, while all the crab's remaining legs clawed the air for the traction they'd lost. The tentacle crushed the crab and conveyed it down to its own Kraken's beak, which engulfed it whole.

But throughout, it seemed to Belinda that the monstrous eye was focused on *them*.

As they hurtled down the size of its eye seemed to grow like a planet. The immense pupils seemed a gulf of worlds where millennial visions seethed.

And what both Melody and Belinda perceived in that colossal eye, what they afterwards reported to each other in awe and solemn wonder, was a consciousness, a recognition of their own brief being. … Was it more? A glint of sly derision, of irony? The titan, old past reckoning, looked out at them from its millennial eye and knew them for the mayflies that they were.

As they dove toward that colossal eye, both sisters saw themselves *known*. For the rest of their lives (neither one short) they spoke of it together, again and again through the years.

They saw in that vast eye a flood of *their own memories*, so minutely etched and poignant, felt themselves plucked back through years and

seasons of their deeds and days, felt warm rain and hot winds on their skin, felt epiphanies of heart and spine on hillsides and freeways, on subways and beaches, saw their own tears in their most secret pain and saw again the starwheels they'd seen blazing through a thousand summer nights gone by.

Within the suckered pads of its two seizing limbs the titan captured their prow, cradled its plunge. Its hugeness began to slide back beneath the waters of the sound as it slowed them gently to a standstill at the channel's brink.

So slowly it submerged, and last of all its eye sank just beneath the surface and hovered there … how many heartbeats?

And in the course of those heartbeats they absolutely knew the brevity of their own lives before the long endurance of this titan.

And knew as well, incommensurate though they were with this colossus, that it saluted their sentience and their brevity. Performed for them this cosmic courtesy—salvation—and withdrew to the benthos that housed its huger life.

The sisters spoke of it together long, long afterwards. Did not that colossus seem *amused?*

They agreed that immense sly eye saw *all* of them—somehow saw their cluttered world far away and their seething confusion within it, and was frostily lit with an irony.

Surely, inwardly, the titan smiled?

DEMIURGE

I brought Grunt to a standstill in the wide grassy field behind his house. I raised his hands palms-up before our eyes and admired them.

He, no doubt, wondered why he was staring at his own hands. I, of course, was still relatively new to possessing such marvelous tools, and I gazed with delight upon them, flexing the fingers and touching their tips to the tips of the thumbs …

Such deft instruments these hands were! How cunningly they took hold of this world! Though big and meaty, they could pick up the smallest things and tease them apart yet smaller still …

I will confess that I felt quite proud—giddy, almost—to have risen to the possession of Grunt, this large and remarkably competent animal. Before Grunt (and his now-deceased associates) I had possessed so many smaller lives. These, though beautiful in their ways, had been so much less able to '*handle*' this gorgeous but daunting terrain.

I began to undress us. I proceeded slowly, methodically unbuttoning his shirt, but it startled him to find himself doing this, and I had to bear down to make his hands obey. Once his shirt was off, I decided to desist and just kept him standing there while I advanced another aspect of my arrangements for him.

These low green hills where Grunt's house stood were scarcely a quarter-mile from the waters of the Bay. And not very far beneath us was one of many little sinuses in the earth that carried these hills' underground drainage to the sea.

This was a minor fissure, but now I began to make it larger. I pulled the Bay's water up into the fissure and pulled it back out again, drilling the earth with the salt flux and enlarging the sinus' bore.

I was reversing the process of drilling a well, and soon enough I had thrust my briny augur right up through the grassy sod we stood on. I made the sea-water form a swirling pond, and every moment it swirled in the grass it widened and widened the cavity it spun in.

Grunt had become quite spellbound by this eruption. I was able to shuck off his shirt and strip off his undershirt as well, while he stood raptly beholding this vortex growing at his feet, but as soon as I sat us down and

started pulling off our boots he became alarmed. I suppose the implication of this act was all too clear to him.

His resistance was powerful. It took real will and skill on my part to get the boots off him.

But that was as child's play, compared to getting our pants off …

But in the end, we stood naked by the swirling pond. It took some holding to keep him standing there, as he now correctly realized that he had just prepared himself to *enter* that orbiting foam.

He'd have taken even more steadying if he had suspected the *partner* that he would shortly meet there.

I had summoned her into the Bay from the offshore waters, and I had brought her near our stand on the bayshore, and now I began threading her like a great silver needle up the sinus that my waters had bored out …

I

At my beginning, my awakening, I was of the earth.

Movement began. Earth and stone were inching downwards through a shape. Equally, this shape was inching upwards through earth and stone …

Earth and stone *were* this shape, replaced by new earth and new stone as the shape moved upwards. But because it moved, it was more than a shape; it was a Will. For it was hard, hard, hard to move upward through the endless earth and stone.

Then this shape, and the will to move that drove it, became more complicated. For a Question entered this shape. The Question was, "What am I going to *do* with all this earth and stone?"

And so this Shape, and the Will that moved it through the earth and stone, and the Question that filled it as it moved … all these together were *I*. *I* was this question climbing through the perfect dark.

And then, the dark itself began to move. Movement not my own surrounded mine.

For I had entered a zone where tiny tubular Energies squirmed everywhere, consuming the earth that was my substance. These little Beings consumed, reshaped, and excreted my earthen flesh. They left it in little coiled droppings shaped by their innards.

I had encountered *living things*.

The experience was ravishing! Being eaten meant entering all these hungry lives, feeling their wills possess me, becoming part of their little bodies, and sharing their wills. I became the hungry meat of them.

Bactera and fungi, avid agile protozoa with their little whipping tails, the greedy fertile sporozoa—I felt their busyness, a stratum of hungers I seeped upwards through. Coelenterates and every shape of worm, the fierceness of their feeding grew about me as I rose.

So many new forms I acquired! So many new friends I made! Literally *made* them, furnishing their flesh and their force. They sacked me for my carbon and I crossed their membranes, possessing them as they did me.

My Being was extensive—perhaps a cubic mile of earth and stone, but now all my joy and fascination were concentrated in my narrow, uppermost layer, which seethed with all these hungry lives enfolding me into themselves.

But soon I rose to the root level, and into the black murk of pond-bottoms. Now the lives got bigger and fiercer. The feeding of these was dramatic, these tool-bearers with their feelers and sensors and mandibles and pincers and seizers. Capturing, sundering, ingesting—they made a grand, festive event of each others' bodies.

All the little earth-eaters that devoured me brought me in turn into the carnivores that devoured *them*.

There came a point when I was—among countless other things, of course—a worm in pond-muck who had just been seized, and was being drained, by a large beetle. As the beetle drew me in and I swiftly possessed her faceted eyes, I discovered that the blackness around us was not exactly the same blackness as before. This blackness had silvery fractures in it. Something else was entering it.

Darkness, and in the same moment Light, were revealed to me.

Glorious, unutterable Light! I worshipped traces of it long before I could fully enter it. This I at last accomplished as a young frog. I climbed up on a rock and sat bathed in the Light, my big eyes brimful of it, my skin all aglow with it.

The sky! And the wide-circling world-floor! This was my dawn, my first unison with the real world's sun-drenched grandeur. I perched gazing and gazing upon it, until I was seized and engulfed by a big gopher snake.

It was not long before I had many new selves—reptiles, amphibians, flying insects—all moving everywhere in this world of light. It was as a

leaf-hopper on a blade of grass that I got into my jackrabbit's mouth.

My jackrabbit! Not merely marvelous eyes he had, but the power and speed to cover whole tracts of golden meadow. With him I first really saw this world, saw the wide splendor of its hills beneath the sky's grand blue dome, saw that blue dome's darkening to black gulfs of stars.

My rabbit was revelation, *running* across the earth, *feeding* on it, wearing the warmth of its light …

But under our second sky together, as we sat browsing on a slope, we were hammered and snatched into the air. I exploded into the sky, great wings hauling us aloft. It was into pure joy I was lofted: when I was devoured, I would become one of *these* and possess the sky as well as the world.

Dismemberment in a high tree! The drama of these bigger life-forms! With what strength and diligence they tore one another to bits!

My hawk's ingestion of me lasted till sundown, but long before it was complete I had entered her bloodstream … And as dusk finally drew down I was *with* her, floating sky-high on mighty wings, beholding the world and its circle of vastness: a world of grassy hills, flanked by a mighty Bay.

My desire was to steer her, to take her even farther aloft and go exploring, and my will jostled hers, scarcely grudging her time to take prey and eat it before goading her up again to feed our miraculous eyes on this world.

And as I was feasting on this overview, what began particularly to draw me was a mighty river that flowed through these hills.

It was actually two rivers, closely twinned, but running contrarily. These rivers flowed with the mightiest creatures I had yet discovered. Likest to huge bugs they were, some of them titanic, most of them gaudy-colored. In their divided unison they hurtled along, diving and climbing across the hills.

My hawk strongly resisted flying close enough to really inspect them, but I overrode her in my greed to know these gaudy monsters more nearly, and I forced her farther downward. It was a very shaky dive we made at one of the beasts, almost colliding with its wide shiny eye.

This seemed to startle the massive creature. It veered, veered back with a shrieking sound, and hit the rear of the bigger, brighter beast before it. A shrieking and veering of other beasts followed, several of which impacted with one another, and froze still.

My hawk and I had recoiled, and we hung above them, though I had to fight my hawk's preference to hang higher still. We watched the damaged beasts.

The particular one that we had startled unfolded a square wing from its flank and extruded—amazing!—*another animal*. A vertical, angular animal with a colorful hide. Apparently this creature inhabited the damaged titan.

I had to have one of *these* creatures. Would it eat a hawk?

Down we swooped, though my hawk fought me hard, and it was only for a moment that I could force it down to hang near the animal's face. Wonderful big eyes it had, frontally set. My hawk pulled back up to hover, and I had to fight to hold her from mounting higher yet.

The creature extended its foreleg, and its wide forepaw crumpled into a kind of knob, and the creature shook this knob at us. Others of the bugs were extruding similar creatures now—*all* of them apparently contained these upright creatures!—but our creature thrust its upper half back *into* its bug. Then in its forepaws it brought out something like a stick, which it pointed up at us.

A hole tore through my hawk's sternum, followed by an incredible noise. We crashed down into the grass, and lay dead.

This amazing vertical creature! What a find! It had power at a distance, killed at a distance. It had power over distance, poured across the hills at incredible speed in its larger companion creatures …

When I first emerged in this world's grandeur, sun-drenched and vast, I had prayed for a stature commensurate with the power to seize it and use it —not yet knowing what form that seizure would take. Now I knew. I *must* become one of these astonishing vertical creatures.

But how approach these beings? What grief to lie flightless in the grass, my sternum a bleeding chasm—to lie here and feel already all the expected little lives emerging from the soil and beginning their deconstruction of my hawk. To be diminished again, reduced beneath the hope of entering one of these marvelous ones with their shiny pet giants …

But a few hours later, under the stars, something bigger-jawed seized me. It carried me off on four quick paws and ran me through moonlit grass, and then up into a big old oak. There she devoured me.

By the time she was nursing her cubs, I was with her in her eyes. Wonderful eyes these were in our shadowy nook. We were raccoons, and I found that nursing was such a satisfying union. The drainage of our life into

these littler ones, what a marvelous experience. How expertly we provided each little mouth with a bud of ourself …

Yet, within our domestic security, we caught a scent of something in the hills around us. This, though distant, caused us unease.

Thus far, all these lives of mine had taught me that they felt unease when they noted their predators near. And their predators were almost always larger and more powerful than they …

The uneasy scent persisting, I waited till we'd nursed our young asleep. These cubs were well grown. I was already in them and could aid in their survival.

I roused my 'coon out of the nest and down the trunk. She was startled, was rebellious to my will from the outset, but the more strongly so now that I set us out directly toward a scent that threatened her. I had to gather my will in the core of her movement, at the base of her skull, compelling her forward while she strove to exert the same muscles in the opposite direction.

I overwhelmed her, not without a slippery fight, and drove her toward the scent she feared. We veered and stumbled and crashed, and rose and scrambled on, crashed again, then found our legs and fought on upslope.

The noise of our coming brought the creature I sought down to meet us, a big streak of moonlit fur.

We were seized by the neck and killed. We were carried up among the trees.

Something *very* big this was. Through the raccoon's glazing eyes (which also saw her cubs in fading memory) I saw muscled legs, a great paw padding along through puddles of moonlight.

It sat in the shadows and made short work of my mother raccoon and me, and had me branching through its blood in short order.

Our eyes were a treasure. From a hundred shades of darkness, every trunk and branch, each spike of grass resolved, and we saw movement as clearly as my hawk had done, yet in darkness. We licked our fur with a huge grainy tongue, and our fur felt silken to our nose. We were big. I knew we could control one of those tall angular creatures from the bugs. If we could get one out of its bug, we could take one. But it seemed to me doubtful we could make one eat us—eat even a part of us.

But none of my other hosts were nearly as large or advanced as this. How soon would I be this big again? I must, without delay, make the most of a

host this large and strong.

At dawn we got up and went back to the place of my raccoon's taking, meaning then to backtrace to where my raccoon took my hawk, near the rivers of bugs.

My cougar soon began showing a resistance to approaching that river every bit as lively as my raccoon's had been against approaching the cougar. The big cat kept veering slantwise from my intent. Surely, one of *his* predators lay in that direction. Could I get myself into some bigger creature than this one? Or, just possibly, was his predator the same angular creature that I sought, the one with the killing stick?

We compromised and sat down in a grove of trees. Something else was developing not too far away. A sizeable snake of mine was taken by claws and a shearing mouth that much recalled my hawk to me. Perhaps I might soon again enjoy an airborne view, to guide my cougar by.

And so it proved. Mid-day, we were together in the air, much more powerful and bigger-winged this time: I was a vulture, a high and endless glider.

The grandeur of this world! There was the Bay, more of it from this height, and across its waters big shapes studded the hills. Though far larger, they had the symmetry of the bugs in their rivers, which still roared along, all their bright carapaces flashing, and within them the vertical creatures—such a multitude! But how to get *at* them?

We glided into the hills to get a sense of what surrounded me in my napping lion. Soon we spotted us, a coil of tawny fur sunk in brush, licking its paw.

But such was my height that I also looked over the hill behind my lion and saw another grassy vale where a big wooden structure squatted—and almost at once we spied one of the vertical creatures standing beside the structure. We slanted down to look more closely.

The creature had a bulky object in its forepaws that roared and snarled, and with this it was slicing chunks off a dead tree that lay partly dismembered near the big box. The creature went on and on with this work, littering the ground with tree-chunks that now and then he stumbled on. Occasionally he took up a much smaller object that glittered, attached this to his mouth, and hoisted it high while his throat worked.

What luck! One of these rare creatures that was not encased in its big bug! I roused the cat at once and headed him towards this fascinating being.

The cat’s resistance quickly grew quite powerful. We watched him, my vulture and I. My cat and I seemed to move by convulsions. I allowed us to crouch and rest, measuring from my vulture’s vantage how much distance I must cross against the cougar’s intense strength. Tender of hurting my beautiful cat, I nonetheless decided a panic explosion of desperate energy should bring us near enough to read at least how we might get closer still.

Our muscles launched us across the earth, our heart threatening failure in such eruption, and after great struggle my cat and I reached high grass bordering the bare zone where the Creature stood lopping its dead tree.

From my vulture I saw we were just a few leaps distant from the Creature, who was again swallowing from the smaller, glittery implement. My cat was restive, still fighting to retreat from this closeness to the vertical creature; but that creature, with the growling of the larger implement that he held in his other paw, seemed not to hear us.

It was all I could do to hold my cat where he crouched. My vulture could see our every muscle tensed under the fur. Quite likely the Creature’s sticks killed cats as well as hawks. We weighed this one’s dimensions.

Though it stood taller on its hind legs, it did not look nearly so strong as my cat and I were. And in truth, our equal mass made it most unlikely the creature would eat us.

So I brought down my vulture and perched him on the dismembered tree, offering *him*.

The creature’s attention was engaged. It silenced and set down its implement. It made odd petting movements at our vulture with its forepaws. Its mouth changed shape and emitted loud complex noises. These noises seemed to be some kind of intricate offering to our vulture.

It gestured at me with both hands. Then it went into the big box behind it.

That gesture was intriguing: both forepaws waved down at the earth. It seemed to be offering my vulture the notion of staying where we were, perched on the dead tree. We did so.

It came back out of the big box with something small in one forepaw. Walked up to my vulture, extended the object, and emitted smoke and thunder! Terrible pain and shock in my cougar’s ears—I could barely hold him as my vulture died.

The creature seized my vulture.

Was it going to eat me? Would it be this easy?

But the creature didn’t eat my vulture. It gathered some small objects, and with a repeated banging of one of them it attached our wings, spread out, to the side of its big box.

In my short time under the sky, I’d already seen hundreds of prey taken by organisms of all sizes. But I had never seen anything like *this* done with them.

When we were affixed to the wall he stumbled back and emitted repeated bursts of mouthnoise at us. There was remarkable variety here, far more than in any of my other creatures’ mouthnoises thus far.

Crouched in the grass, I and my cougar considered our paws. Big and powerful, but they seemed useless for the task of tearing my buzzard in pieces that would fit in the creature’s mouth and then inserting them there. The vertical creature, I began to realize, had the most amazing forepaws. Look at all the things those forepaws could take hold of, large and small …

With these paws of mine the creature could be pinned down, but I’d never get anything into its mouth. Baffled, I pessimistically reviewed the rest of my lion’s resources—and realized that a major conduit of our blood ran right through our throat here.

The creature was using the small shiny implement again, and—leaning perhaps too far back as he guzzled—fell over backwards. No hesitation—we must force this opportunity, but must by no means inadvertently kill the temporarily horizontal creature.

I launched the lion violently—I could control him at no lesser pitch.

The creature, struggling to rise, fell back beneath our leap. But as we landed on it, its struggles took on furious energy.

I couldn’t secure it. No help for it but I had to stun it with a swat to the head. Such was my strength, I could only pray I wouldn’t break it.

The creature lay stunned but still intact. Its eyes still moved, though more slowly.

But when I tried to force its mouth open, it came to life again. By the time I had it immobilized once more, it seemed I had somewhat damaged its jaw …

But this instant must be seized, and with one claw I sundered the artery in my lion’s throat.

It was a wasteful and messy transfer. But for all that was wasted, a large volume of my lion’s blood got down its throat, which it had to swallow to keep from drowning.

At least this sort of exchange went quickly. Not very long after my lion had died, I was *in* this vertical creature.

But my grip on the creature's behavior was … vague. We seemed to be in accord about pushing the lion off of us, but our coordination seemed very poor. The creature swayed severely once upon its feet. Its damaged jaw seemed to cause it great discomfort. It uttered many noises. It went into the box and emitted more noises into a small object, which emitted noises in return. My creature had great difficulty forming its noises with our damaged jaw …

Before long one of the bugs (not so bright-colored as most I'd seen in the big rivers) came up to the box along a small path that led to it over the hills … It stopped and extruded a flap. My creature climbed into it.

Another vertical creature was inside it, this one extremely furred about the head and face. This one commanded the bug back the way it had come, clearly directing its movement with a large round implement.

New wonders! The bug was not an organism, but a conveyance! I waited, passive, awed. And came to realize something new about my situation.

I did not *have* this creature in the same definitive way I had had my hawk, my raccoon, my lion.

Those earlier companions had responded directly to what they saw or scented and were fairly simple to control. This creature seemed to be seeing things that weren't coming through its eyes. These things had something to *do* with its eyes, they were seen, but they came from somewhere else, and *I* couldn't see them.

They guided the bug onto the big river and along it for a while, then dove off the big river and into a smaller one, and thence into a towering wilderness of big boxes and crisscrossing paths down which flowed innumerable other bugs.

I was filled with awe. The creatures were walking everywhere, along paths that paralleled these smaller rivers of bugs, and winding their way among the great boxes, some quite tall, all eyed with glass through some of which you glimpsed more of the creatures.

I truly understood now what I had here. These creatures ruled this world! They had rebuilt it. All the structure-clusters I had seen ringing the great Bay were theirs!

This realization kept coming home to me as we left our bug and went into a bright place, full of light inside, that was devoted, as it developed, to

repairing these creatures when their bodies were damaged.

At first we sat a long time with our hindquarters rooted in cupped supports. We were waiting, it seemed, to be summoned deeper within this structure.

A number of other creatures joined us in our waiting—our associates, apparently—and most of them were shag-headed and hairy-faced, unlike the majority of creatures in this structure.

All of them made a lot of mouthnoise aimed at me. Periodically my creature tried to emit mouthnoise in answer to theirs, pointing at his incapable jaw. Then the others tilted their heads back and unhinged their jaws and emitted booming and cawing sounds, and erupted with more mouthnoise.

We were taken deeper inside and had our jaw encased in a metallic contrivance. At our release from these apparently painful services, we were given several tubular containers of some shiny objects that rattled when shaken. Back outside—we and six others now—we shared out all the little colored pebbles in these cylinders, and everyone swallowed them with fizzy gulps from bottles.

Back up the river we went—a group of conveyances now: two shabby bugs, one with an empty box on its hindquarters, and three loud black things, smaller, which three of our group straddled.

Back in our box, my creature and I were installed in a soft, upright support.

More bottles came out, and more pebbles for swallowing, and white dust we inhaled through our nose. A square object was caused to produce a new and compelling noise, strongly cadenced, both shrill and booming, and mixed with mouthnoise.

It went on far into the night. They got up, fell down, got up and drank, swallowed pebbles, sniffed powder, ignited small objects and breathed in their smoke, made endless mouthnoise along with the howling box-noise, fell down, and got up again …

At last, all sprawled asleep. I had longed to try producing some mouthnoise myself, but my creature was useless in this way, writhing and grunting when I tried moving his jaw even a little.

I pondered long, fascinated and baffled. With all the powers they commanded, and the speed of their movement across this earth in their conveyances, why did they sprawl here in this box for hours on end? Their

glorious world I had seen from the sky—why weren't they *doing* something with it? This colossal theater of air and earth and water—it woke a huge formless will in me for I knew not what, and I gazed with misgiving upon all my snorting, wheezing, gurgling companions in their slumber.

By the following mid-day the whole boxful were somewhat active, moving vaguely, drinking and sucking smoke and swallowing colored stones. As the sun moved past its zenith, they grew more active and began producing more intense mouthnoise. It seemed to move toward a kind of peak, and they began rummaging. Every surface in the box was a dense litter of objects, more than half of them bottles. A chaos of rummaging, and then all seven creatures went out of the box (mine the last and moving the most unsteadily)—out into the dead-tree area where I'd first met my creature. We all descended on my dead cougar.

Our activity was chaotic, and for a long time I was at a loss to understand what we were doing. Then I beheld their intent, They had the whole skin off the lion, and this they affixed to the side of the box beside the vulture.

Then they took the lion's carcass and dragged it out onto the field a fair little distance away. They got objects to sit on near the box and sat on them with a number of bottles and several killing sticks, as well as some of the smaller killing objects like the one my creature had used to kill my vulture.

It dawned on me that they were going to wait for another vulture to come down for the lion so they could attach that one as well to their wall.

As all this cohered in my understanding, a tremendous excitement filled me. With their mouthnoise they had shaped and shared this present arrangement, this *intent*.

The evidence was compelling. They all shared an inclination to collect dead animals and attach their bodies or skins to the wall of their box. They had laid a large mass of carrion out on the grass in their line of sight and arranged themselves to wait with killing sticks.

How could I have been so slow to grasp the function of their mouthnoise? It was always accompanied by actions, but was so disordered that no correlation had emerged. But *this*— Having arranged a future for ourselves, we all now sat with our firearms waiting for it to come to pass.

Oh, Chthonos! Lord of earth and all life! I had burned to know what to do with this breathtaking world of yours, and now I knew that with these creatures, something indeed could be done. Seven of them, and surely, far more than seven, could be coordinated into a single venture with the right

strings of mouthnoise. With their swift mobility and endless implements, what could they not be persuaded to do?

I must possess this mouthnoise, and therefore must possess my associates here, as my own partner couldn't even move his jaw to produce it.

Meanwhile, I knew their intent would be thwarted. Having been a vulture, I knew none would descend to the dead lion—not with so many large animals in motion this close to the carrion. There was too much flourishing of bottles, loud mouthnoise, and vigorous movement of their limbs and heads. Then, to my surprise, a pair of sizeable black birds *did* coast near and land beside the carcass.

Crows.

Uproar in our group … and, before and throughout the incredible noise their killing sticks started making, I detected a very clear pulse of mouthnoise incessantly and loudly repeated.

The sticks thundered and thundered, dirt exploded from the grass all around the crows, as both took wing and climbed back up, undamaged, into the sky, and throughout all this I sat enraptured. I had *grasped* a piece of their mouthnoise:

SHOOT 'EM! SHOOT THE FUCKERS!

Clearly, these precise noises meant kill the crows with the steel sticks!

I was granted this revelation, but then the group grew restless. Some used their killing sticks on trees and stones in the field. Others urinated on closer targets. Others went into the big box for more bottles.

If I were inside all these others, who could produce it, I might come to *understand* their mouthnoise sooner.

I prompted my companion up into the big box. I'd found that he only vaguely resisted my promptings if they were to actions he customarily did of his own will. This had taught me that many of his movements came almost automatically to him. Focussed moments like *shoot-the-fucker* seemed infrequent in him.

He moved quite easily to my intent. In the box we found a receptacle and began pouring the contents of bottles into it. Some of these contents were foamy, some brownish, some clear as water.

The next step needed care. Which of my conduits could I drain enough blood from without killing as my lion had been killed? I picked a copious one in my foreleg whose contents were less pressurized. With a sharp implement, I sliced into the conduit. Even as I did it my companion

recoiled, astonished, and blood was flung at large. I clamped down, and we bled more than enough into the mixture of liquids. Then I took up empty bottles from the multitude around us and filled them with my beverage.

My companion—whose bleeding I'd tied off with a rag—grew cooperative. He made soft mouthnoise and a cackling sound, gathering the bottles and carrying them out of the box. I realized he had accepted my project as *his*. How different these animals were from my hawk, or my cat. Those creatures' actions were direct responses to things—desired or doubted—in this world around them.

But these creatures, with their trick of seeing things in their heads and not through their eyes, could be made to take my intentions for their own.

We thrust the bottles on our companions. Took one ourselves and drank from it. We gasped, but brandished our bottle and seemed to proclaim its excellence. All the others swallowed some, and most displayed violent emotion. Mouthnoise and gestures. At length, though … all had drained their bottles. So swift and effervescent blood is. Soon I was Seven.

II

Going north near dusk on 101 James Deuce—freeway-flying part-time teacher at various colleges—got a flat on his piece-a-shit car's right rear.

A near thing, that—wobbling and yawing across the lane to his right and into the breakdown lane. He got out, a lean gray-bearded man just slightly taller than short. He was going to shout *shit!*, but just before he could gather breath for a cathartic roar, a huge guy on a big Harley came growling and rumbling to idle behind his car.

But having killed and kickstanded the bike, this huge hairy guy seemed to have no idea what he wanted with James. He looked kind of dazed, actually.

James, who had worked with so many students over the years, understood how easy it was for people to become confused. He was, by long habit, automatically supportive of confused people.

"Hey, man!" he smiled. "This is really nice of you, but you don't have to help me. I have a spare this time, thank God, and I've gotten really good at this."

The man still looked troubled, but at the same time urgent. His mouth moved a couple times, and then he said,

“Choot the fokker!”

James Deuce had to laugh. “I *want* to! I *want* to shoot the fucker, but I can’t afford to!” And from his long teaching of non-native speakers—this guy he guessed for a Swede or something—James raised his hand in the thumb-forefinger rub denoting cash.

The huge guy seemed much moved. He began to try to put his hand in his pocket. His movement was almost violently uncoordinated, and his face was in a scowl. It took him five tries to get his hand in. He had to be seriously shitfaced, yet James—a drinker himself up until ten years ago—smelled nothing.

Meanwhile the guy’s expression was so strange. His eyes looked … astonished. He pulled out and extended to James a thick fold of cash.

“Oh, no. Hey, you’re very kind, but I’m OK. Really.”

But the man lurched closer, thrusting the money, and said “Ch-shoot the facker!”

James, noting that the guy had improved his pronunciation, had the sudden intuition that he wanted help with his speech. Ignoring the bills, James said, “That’s almost right. Listen. It’s *ssshhoootuh the fuuuucker*.” Trying to exhibit clearly how he produced the sibilant.

Bingo. The man instantly aped him, blowing the *sshhh* hard, getting the sentence almost exactly right. “Perfect!” James nodded vigorously. An emphatic reinforcement of correct utterance was, after all these years, second nature to him.

Now the man thrust the money more emphatically at him, repeating the perfected words. James said, “You want help speaking English.” He made talking fingers before his mouth and pointed from himself to the man.

A look almost like rapture smoothed the big hairy face. He flapped one hand against his chest. “Grunt!” he said.

“Hi, Grunt. I’m”—touching his own chest—“James.”

“Ghame.”

“No. Jjjjaamezzz”—careful exhibition of his mouth as he repeated it.

“Jamezzz.”

“Perfect!” James took out a card and traded it with the man for the cash. Twenties on top, half an inch thick. Christ. Just go with it, he thought.

He gently took the guy's huge hand and tilted it so they could both see the face of his card. "My *number*"—pointing. "Call me"—phone gesture.

Could Grunt have understood? But he seemed satisfied and turned back toward his bike.

"Hey!" James said. "There's a crow on your handlebar!" It sat perched calmly on the upper curve of the left ape-hanger and seemed to be studying both of them. Some mascot? But it took to the air when the biker saddled up and revved the engine. As he roared into the traffic stream, he gave James the strangest look of amazed resentment …

James was indeed good at changing his tires on roadsides. Behind the wheel, just before pulling out, he counted the money. Almost 5K in cash! Imagine that!

Since he'd stopped drinking, James had come to find people more and more interesting. Strange behavior was everywhere—the term had almost no meaning. This guy, it seemed sure, had next to no English at all. Could he manage a phone call? And how could they converse if he did manage one?

Well, if they could hook up, James would teach him.

At full dark he pulled up the short gravel road to his cabin—a really cheap rental, and rightly so. He hauled out his satchels and kneed the car door shut—and confronted a crow on his car's roof. The crow, unflustered, cocked its eyes at him. James had to smile. "You're not even a nocturnal species, dude."

Unsettling though. Surely this was the same bird that was perched on the Harley. He went inside, meaning to come right back out, but his daughter Maxie called from Maine, where she was crewing a sailboat. He told her about his encounter.

"Awesome. You're like St. Francis of Assisi, Dad."

"Yes. I beckon the birds and teach the poor baffled vagabond."

"Not so poor."

"What else can I do but use it? I need a new used car."

He called his son Harv at his college in Oregon and told him too. Harv liked his sister's St. Francis crack. "I dunno, Dad. The guy works with a trained crow, right? He's running some scam on you."

"But why on me? Why con some bum with a car like mine?"

"You were pulled over. You were accessible."

When James got back outside, the crow was gone.

He had a can of his favorite chili. He settled in his couch and opened Gibbon, sank back into the fourth century, and swam blissfully in a sea of Olympian language.

- - -

Of my seven new colleagues I concentrated most on Grunt.

This was an astonishing achievement of mine. In my three days of multiple residence in the box, I had isolated seven new mouthnoises, each one belonging uniquely to one of us: Lionel (of the broken jaw), Skag, Wrench, Grunt, Rod, Tuggs, and Cracker. When anyone mouthed one of these noises, only one creature—always the same—would respond.

I favored Grunt, the biggest, because he was the one who could compel all the others' attention. I set my crow to following him on any action, to enlarge our viewpoint and discoveries, while I rode observant within him and almost never interfered with him.

We were returning from an exchange we had made of some bagged vegetation for some of the Important Paper involved in so many of the errands of our group, when we encountered a creature outside of his broken bug. It was a fortunate impulse, my pulling us over. It startled Grunt and he generated a little resistance, but I could not bypass opportunities to interact directly with these creatures whenever a new one offered, and I suppressed him.

A fortunate impulse of mine, for this creature, as it came to pass, actually *helped* me to produce mouthnoise—modeled its production for me!

Here, I knew, was a major turning in my destiny. Despite a surprisingly stubborn rebellion on Grunt's part, I extracted our Important Paper from his pocket and put it in *JAMES's* possession. Then, while my crow followed JAMES's bug back to his dwelling, Grunt and I went back to our box.

What a storm of mouthnoise developed there! Important Paper was urgently expected from Grunt—this was obvious. I knew he had none to offer—James had it all. Grunt, however, seemed simply to be refusing to share the paper—his hand pressed protectively against the pouch he had carried it in, as if the paper were still there.

A real storm took shape among the group, but Grunt grew louder and bigger while it developed, and violently shook a large metal implement in the air, until everyone had retreated well away from him.

Everyone reclined or sprawled with a bottle. In the relative silence I recognized Grunt's condition, which was restless. He was struggling to

adapt to something that *I* had peremptorilly made us do, which *he* did not want us to do.

With all seven of my new partners, though generally I interfered with them at an absolute minimum, their reaction to interference was something I found most interesting. In their aftershock, they always struggled to produce some action or some mouthnoise to account for—as a choice of their own—something which I'd made them do.

Grunt stirred. He had something. He rose and began to make mouthnoise and, after a while, elicited answering noise. It began to look as if our group was developing a new intention. For one thing, some implements were gathered, including the killing sticks. Then we took up a number of new bottles.

Sure enough. After draining those bottles deep in the night, we all went outside and started climbing the hill amidst the trees.

It was a long trek, during which everyone fell on his face two or three times. Still we climbed, all of us getting more into the rhythm of the work. At last we stopped at a thick stand of trees.

More mouthnoise among us, though all this was in very low voices. We entered the trees and emerged in a zone of smaller, more pungent vegetation —the kind, in fact, that Grunt had recently exchanged for the Important Paper which we had given to James.

All seven of us used small implements at the bases of several of these plants, detaching them from the earth. Carrying these, we returned the way we had come, descending the hills.

Back in the box, more bottles were evoked, and more and different mouthnoise raged among us—mouthnoise that sounded quite convivial. We drank, kept poking each other, and made each other tilt our heads back and bray. All this while we were cutting these plants in smaller pieces and putting these pieces in transparent bags. When the bags were packed into a much larger one, Wrench made use of the little implement they talked into.

He learned something from it that was to the general satisfaction of the group. Grunt extended his hand for the large bag. All the others leapt up in a unison of mouthnoise. It was Skag who took the bag and left the box with it. Then drinking and mouthnoise raged among us, even unto oblivion.

Next day, by the time the sun was at zenith, we were all back outside in our chairs under the vulture and the lion skin. The crows had nearly finished my lion's carcass, with help overnight from some raccoons, four

more vultures, a possum, and six coyotes. As the sun cleared the horizon I was already all over those hills, flying above them and treading them on my various paws. And even now I was guiding a pair of raccoons back up to that patch of hidden vegetation. I found *hundreds* of those plants hidden amidst those trees.

I thought longingly of James. The creature had *helped* me make mouthnoise! And clearly, he'd been moved by the paper I'd given him, which had been received for a much smaller mass of that plant Skag had just left the box with. Surely he'd return with much more of that Paper. I would take James more of it, a lot more.

Indeed, Skag brought more back, and we all took some. I sat and weighed the fairly considerable amount of data I'd gathered about my creatures' patterns of interaction. Among them, receipt of Paper aroused satisfaction and compliance. Receipt of more induced commensurately more compliance.

Analogously, receipt of more vegetation should produce more paper.

I'd also learned that the liquid in our bottles and cans created variable windows of intervention for me. The more liquid swallowed, the more intervention was accommodated by those who had swallowed it. But *too much* liquid rendered my friends almost completely inoperable.

But within that liquid spectrum, I could drive them easily—and if I'd made one do something startling to the others, he would produce his own mouthnoise to account for what he'd done. It appeared he scarcely knew my will from his in that state.

The following night, then, as we were swallowing a lot of liquid, I made Grunt again my center of operations. We watched our friends subside to unconsciousness. We stopped drinking and stood up.

Grunt's condition was perfect: well this side of inoperability, but easily steered. Leaving the box, we collided first with one side, then with the other side of the exit-hole. Then we found a better balance and managed our exit.

Our group had a sturdy three-wheeled vehicle that drew behind it a low fenced platform. They would fill it with the loppings of their dead trees and drag them to a big heap of others behind the box. Grunt and I mounted this vehicle and drove it back up into the hills toward that high hidden stand of vegetation.

It was a rough ride, the terrain quite steep at times. We raised a great deal of dust and slammed the fenced platform into various parts of various trees

as we ascended. But our aim was achieved.

The fenced box held a remarkable number of plants. We got half the little field into it. Grunt, toward the end of this work, began to exhibit a dawning surprise and hesitancy. He kept pausing in our work, so it seemed advisable that we open a new, flat bottle of the fiery brown liquid and empty it down our throat.

That did the trick. We strapped our load under cords and went bouncing back down the hillsides. The dark was graying as we descended.

By the time we brought the third armload of vegetation into the box, everyone else was waking up.

By Chthonos! What a storm of mouthnoise raged then! As each one of us became conscious, the same whole exchange of discovery and protest was repeated. Grunt, enkindled, was masterfully beating back their noise with his own. The acquisition of a large amount of vegetation became entirely his own passionate intent, and he found all the force needed, eventually, to subdue the rest to our purpose. We began breaking up the plants and bagging them.

- - -

James sat in the armchair that half filled his cabin's micro-porch, his Coleman lantern hissing wonderfully like a distant sea. Back in the fourth century again, and loving it.

When he heard a Harley far down on the branch road, he knew instantly who it was. Had the inarticulate giant somehow decoded James's card? But James still favored a hunch that the guy was completely illiterate.

And here he was, high, wide, and hairy. There was a touching solemnity in his dismounting. His eyes showed something like rapture as he mounted the steps. James couldn't help beaming, getting up to take his hand. Even that handshake seemed to astonish him.

"This is a pleasure. Come inside"—enunciating in detail, in case there was a word there he knew.

They took chairs at James's wiped-off kitchen table. Grunt set a thick stack of bills on it.

James sweetly and slowly explained and gestured to him that he had paid his money already. James wouldn't take more.

Grunt gazed down upon the cash. It seemed his eyes … guttered. They flashed now with something close to tenderness, and now with a kind of

startlement, or outrage, as if he were just then discovering himself sitting in this cabin.

But his focused and more rapturous mood prevailed. He gestured unsteadily at the cash. Said, with perfect enunciation—he had *remembered!* —"Shoot the fucker!"

The teacher in James was hooked. He had to help this guy. He put his palm to his chest, to convey regard and gratitude. Took the packet—thick! —and shoved it, uncounted, into his pocket.

OK. James always narrated everything he did in a student's presence, trying to print some vocab illustrated by his actions. "First we're going to see" (touch to the eyes) "if you can *read*." And taking a book from the shelf, he opened it and with his fingers and eyes pantomimed scanning the lines on the page. "*Read*. Can *you?"*

Grunt gazed back in perfect bafflement.

"OK. When we *talk?*—blah blah blah—that's *talk*."

"Tawg."

"T-a-l-k."

"Talk."

"Perfect. *We* talk—blah blah blah—and these *lines* talk—blah blah. These *lines* talk to *me*." With final pantomimes.

Bullseye. All rapture, now, the hairy titan. He got it.

So. The rest of the lesson was obvious to James now. Start building this poor strange guy some *vocabulary*.

For three hours James circled his little cabin, naming everything, teaching him nouns and using these to teach him action verbs.

By the second hour James had grown amazed. One, at most two careful repetitions, and Grunt had the pronunciation and the meaning. At the end of their session he pointed out or clumsily mimed over a hundred and fifty perfectly articulated nouns and verbs.

When Grunt left, James took out the money and counted it. Lots of hundreds and five hundreds amid the twenties and fifties. A hundred K and change!

James sat thinking for a long time.

Then he called Kaylin, his ex-wife. "Hey, sweetie. Can we talk frankly on this line about … acquired value?"

"If you've got some money for us, honey, spill it."

"A hundred K in cash, mixed bills, old and new."

A long silence. “Where’s it from?”

“It’s a teaching fee! Look, I’ll tell you when I see you. The point is, it’s cash. Can you absorb it, uh, tracelessly?”

She gave it some thought. “Yes! And I don’t want to know any more than that about it.”

They arranged the delivery of it in the morning. Kaylin had worked in real-estate, a smart, irresistible woman who was well networked. She could turn it into harmless value-added, finish off the mortgage, leave her some free time from side-jobs.

She’d divorced him just before he’d quit drinking. They still lived together half the time, though she’d insisted on leaving off the legal bond. They’d all gone on as a family, got the kids through college. They’d never spent less than two weeks every month living together since the divorce.

James of course could not help having misgivings about all this cash. Grunt’s coif, his costume, his conveyance, the look of his cash—all these wafted to James strong suggestions about his métier.

But James refused to brood on these considerations. There was something so remarkable about this endeavor, James’s to teach and Grunt’s to learn. It was fascinating to work with such an impoverished and yet prehensile mind.

How, if he could barely talk, could he be managing in the risky business he—

No. No further with that. This project James had entered on was—taken strictly on its own terms—completely compelling. Let that be enough. James had to find out just how much he could teach this strange guy.

III

Astonishing, my new riches! This trove of language I took away from James! Back at the box, I lay gloating over my hoard: *Glass. Knife. Window. Door. Pick up. Put down. Open. Shut.* Soon I could suggest and shape the actions of other Men—even Men I did not yet inhabit.

Long I lay gloating in the snoring darkness of my drunken fellows, and I kept Grunt awake along with me, using his lips and lungs and larynx to murmur over the lovely words I’d learned … So that Grunt was last to wake the following mid-day.

I decided to focus chiefly on him today, because it was immediately clear that some dangerous activity was developing outside our box, and Grunt seemed—of all of us—the best adapted to survive the situation that was even now in progress.

Killing sticks were cracking and booming outside. He blinked, and glass blew out of one of the windows and scattered across his face. Then more steel sticks cracked and boomed.

Grunt and I got up and went out to join the others.

Wrench and Rod were sprawled out on the grass with blood leaking out of a number of holes in them. Lionel and Skag and Tuggs and Cracker, from a number of covers, were firing out into the trees at the edge of our clearing. Suddenly there was a shriek, and another man—one I didn't know—fell out from between the trunks.

No further gunfire came from the trees.

We all pulled Wrench and Rod—and the new man who had been shooting at us—back behind the box, where the chunks of dead tree were stored. We activated a big conveyance with a single huge arm and hand made of yellow steel. With this "backhoe" we dug a very large hole.

We dropped the three dead men into it and—with a swinging, scraping motion of the backhoe—replaced the earth on top of them.

I keenly regretted helping them put Wrench and Rod under the earth, where nothing more mobile than a worm could feed on them—for I was in them, of course, and craved to take them abroad and aloft.

Back in the box, we all paced furiously, each shouting and waving his arms at the others. All our brains were drowning in the storm of our mouthnoise, our "*talk*."

Though I listened desperately to hear some of the words I had learned and possessed, I was still powerless to follow the shifting weave of their meaning. Here and there they did use some of *my* Talk, but I couldn't connect it with all the other Talk they were making.

And all the time I was marveling: what interesting and eventful lives these Men lived! Far more various than any other lives I'd joined. Their relations with their own kind were on such a grand scale, so elaborate. And these relations had nothing to do with feeding (though much with drinking), or mating, or moving consciously and discreetly through this world.

Had I not already learned how many of them there were—had I not already seen how they overswarmed this world—this morning's activity

would have made me wonder how they survived at all!

So. The remaining five of us shouted and raged at one another in our box, deafening ourselves with talk.

At last, as the sun sank from zenith, we all went outside into the field and continued this furious talk, waving our arms and hammering the earth with our Boots.

And suddenly, there came once more the roar of the steel sticks. We made our own roar in response. We all lay or crouched within a lethal storm of bullets while we ourselves produced the same.

When it ceased, we had three more dead—Lionel, Tuggs, and another unknown Man up in the trees.

When we'd dragged these together behind our box, we had our loudest roar of talk thus far, and our shortest.

Cracker and Skag sped off on their vehicles, and I let them go. Being already with them, I would learn all that their further travels had to teach.

Grunt and I now had the whole place to ourselves.

The day's end was beginning to draw down.

This was so opportune! Now I was in a position to reap a bonanza of extended being. I removed my dead companions' clothes and dragged them out into the field—well spaced to allow maximal groups of scavengers to settle on them.

In the course of this work, Grunt began to resist it strongly. I sensed very clearly that he would rather *hide* than *expose* his dead mates. I took us into the house for a bottle. We drained it and got smoothly back to our work.

Next, we dug up the three we had buried yesterday. We undressed them and dragged them out into the field as well. (I included the two unknown men—who did not contain me—merely to increase the signal attracting scavengers.)

Grunt and I then took a comfortable chair by the wall beneath the nailed remains of our lion and bird. Having set plenty of bottles by our chair for our awakening, I allowed Grunt to fall asleep, but one of my raccoons and a possum of mine and many of my birds were already moving toward the feast and gave me ample views of it.

The night settled down and hid the busy feasting upon the silent dead.

Grunt woke when the sun had just risen. Our field of dead men seethed with life, encrusted with supple, bright-furred, and bright-feathered devourers.

Grunt took up one of the bottles I had laid by, and we drank as we watched. He seemed to fall into my own fascination with the spectacle. As the day brightened and perfect silence filled our field, it became quite easy to hear the little nippings and tearings all our guests were making at their meat. Glossy black plumage and dappled fur rippled and flexed with the work of devouring.

By late afternoon, I had taken to the air on so *many* broad wings and into the trees on so many fleet paws, and in the day's declining light I beheld even more of the size and grandeur of this world.

All down along its great ridges of hills, great clusters of man-boxes turned on their lights. All around the Bay's great lens, the bright bugs rivered with their blazing eyes. And these men had *made* all these forms and these lights—they even had mile-long bug-rivers spanning the water!

What a colossal, chaotic enterprise was here! And yet, if I had learned anything from this pack of humans I'd grown close to, it was that they could be recruited to *any enterprise*—however insane—if they could only be made to believe they desired it. And making them *do* something was the readiest way to make them believe that they *desired* it.

By the end of three days, I was a great host of new animals upon the hills as well as in the skies. And in our long rest, Grunt's and mine, I gave much thought to something that had never, since my awakening, left my awareness.

For there was another, larger Being like myself at the edge of my moist meadow, where my earthen self frayed out to the great mass of solid water that was the Bay. This Other, a will like my own, but of the Sea, was far more extensive than I. I longed to know the life-forms it was learning.

I had already discovered as well, in my earth beneath Grunt's field, a subterranean river that transected my buried mass, and that this, like all such streams I'd encountered, fed the Bay—was a branch, was a *root* of the Other's great watery realm.

The subterranean stream was a point of transection between our domains. The Other must long have recognized my presence, and thus it would sense my intentional intrusion into its realm. It might answer my solicitation by sending some ambassador. But how would mutual transfer be accomplished?

Inspired, I remembered *mating*. If she sent an envoy, I might send myself into her envoy, and thence to her world.

After these three days, our friends and attackers were all clean bones. It had not been lost on me that discretion regarding their dead was one impluse of these men. And once I had brought Grunt to the one-armed digging machine, he took over willingly and did a brisk job of making a new cavity and burying all the bones in it.

I now hung back within Grunt. How would he proceed in our new situation?

He went back into the box and used a bottle. He gazed at the three bulky packets of plant pieces as yet unexchanged for Paper. He picked up the Telephone.

- - -

After dinner, James and Kaylin sat on the deck of his cabin. She took the big cushioned chair and he brought out a kitchen chair.

“About this windfall,” he began.

“Not a word, sweetie. Just thanks for taking the chance. This economy was hammering us. Now the house is ours, no strings, no trace. Nuff said. I don’t wanna know *anything* about it.”

“Hey, is that …? Well, here comes a student of mine. Get in your car now and you won’t even meet him.”

Kaylin gave it some thought. “I don’t like bolting. I’ll say hi and then take off.”

They stood to greet him when Grunt pulled up. He approached with that same rapt solemnity he’d shown last time. Kaylin was full-breasted, and he seemed to regard her with puzzlement and interest.

James laughed. Indicated himself. “James. Man. He.”

Grunt eagerly nodded, having learned it last time.

“Kaylin. Woman. She.”

Grunt repeated the words devoutly and perfectly.

As it turned out, Kaylin stayed for the whole lesson, and helped. She studied Grunt’s face with unrelenting interest, except for that moment when Grunt, with that ceremonious way of his (and with that same strange flash of alarm and amazement in his eyes), reached into his pocket. She turned right around, gave that transaction her back, and thus missed how disturbingly fat this stack of bills was.

When Grunt roared away and they stood watching him off, she asked, “What’s his first language?”

“I can’t even guess. I’ve never heard him use it.”

Kaylin hesitated before asking, “Do you think he *speaks* any other language?”

“I’ve had the same thought, I admit. He might have had a concussion and lost it all, aphasia …”

“Yeah, but I didn’t see any impairment. How many words was that?”

She was referring to the lesson’s concluding exam—a naming by Grunt in flawless fluency of every object around them and all the physical actions that could be performed with them.

“Over three hundred and fifty.”

“Jimmy”—she only called him that when she hugged him goodbye, as she did now—“I understand better now. This is … something else. But it could still blow up in your face.”

“I know. But listen. If this”—and he gave her Grunt’s payment—“is as much as I think it is, then I’ll teach him one more lesson and move out of here the next day. Break the connection.”

They hugged tighter and did some kissing. “Have you noticed,” she said, still holding his face between her hands, “that his eyes look a little insane from time to time?”

“Listen, honey. I’ve taught every kind of immigrant God ever made. I’ve taught in every—”

“I know I know I know. You’ve taught in factories and prisons and mineshafts and on the dark side of the moon. Just watch out for your bony little ass, OK?”

“When have I ever failed to—”

“Don’t get me started. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

James sat on his porch, reflecting.

OK, suppose the guy had no language of his own. How then was James going to get English fully installed into Grunt’s thought processes? How install Therefore, Because, On the contrary, If/Then, Whenever, In spite of, Must, Must not …?

Grunt’s memory, at least, was a powerful enticement to see how far James could take him.

- - -

When we got back from my second lesson, I named the Other She. Kaylin’s unusual pectoral structures were clearly analogues to my raccoon’s more numerous members for feeding offspring. In James’s box was a picture of

him and Kaylin with two much smaller creatures which in some ways resembled them. Offspring.

I found a pleasing symmetry here. As Kaylin was James's She, so the Other was *my* She. Perhaps, if I was lucky, we would procreate.

I must do all I could to make this possible.

To begin with, Grunt and I must now make an aperture in the field and sink it down to She's water-branch. It would have to be big enough for Grunt to fit down through it.

I judged the stream's depth below the field's surface to be about twice the box's height. Behind the box was a tall metal object from whose high tip hung a length of large pipe. It sat near a heap of earth, and a tubular hole in the ground, this hole not very deep. Grunt would never fit down such a hole, but this apparatus might be moved to the field to make a start for us. Grunt was groggy. I furnished us with some bottles and took us out to the dusty apparatus.

It had a seat-like arrangement, which we sat in. We had one more bottle before I started prompting Grunt's hands to parts of the mechanism that were reminiscent of those controlling the one-armed machine. I didn't know what I wanted him to do, but from being kept there and being kept drinking, Grunt soon enough took the apparatus in hand. It rumbled to life.

Our progress was jerky. I had to bend his random movements to my intent. Long and patient was my persistence, and three more were Grunt's bottles. The sun had moved two diameters before I had us down on the field directly above She's liquid root.

But the actual digging was a routine of simple movements that had, I sensed, long familiarity to Grunt, and soon he was immersed in the process. At last we were hammering into my earth and plucking out of it a tubular hole. It was a hole, I knew, down whose diameter I might have passed, at most, one of Grunt's legs. But then, the one-armed engine could broaden it once we'd drilled this narrower shaft.

Twice in three days Grunt passed out and snored long and loud. And after both sleeps, when he rose from the mattress that we had dragged out into the field (along with a case of bottles), Grunt tottered to his feet, unzipped, and began urinating.

And after he had urinated a while and his head had cleared somewhat, both times he raised his eyes and saw our digging machine towering there, and the little hills of my earth surrounding it. Then he gaped disbelieving

and erupted in wild talk at the machine, hurled clods of my earth at it, and stumbled around flourishing our arms.

And both times, after a while we went back in the box and had a few more bottles, and some pills and powder, and came back out and got back to work.

Meanwhile, in the course of these days, She acknowledged our reaching-down for her, and with a thrilling-cold amplification of her flow, her stream swelled within my earth, promising an Answer. And just before that third sunset, She begun fetching some tidal pressure up into our sinus, reversing her direction of flow—and with a rotary turbulence that scrubbed and gnawed the sinus wider.

Our one-armed machine had dug a crater twelve feet deep down the axis of this shaft. We paused by that engine in the early dusk, waiting for what She seemed on the cusp of doing.

… Yes! Something was coming. There! Dark water foamed up out of the shaft.

I saluted Her with all my being, and felt a great answering impulse from the Bay beyond the hills. Her flood spun, circling higher. As the sun was setting we sat on the heaps of spoil watching—even Grunt—in wonder. The flux cleared as it spun upwards, the water limpid as it rose and darkened with the day. We could see that the shaft at our pool's root had widened so much that perhaps it would accommodate three-quarters of Grunt's mass. I did not yet know Her deep ingenuity.

We went back for more bottles, came out, and sat back down to watch our pond's filling in the dusk. The bottles were a precaution because I could not know precisely what we would be doing with Grunt's body that he had not done with it before.

The pool rose till we had to retreat to the crest of the spoil around it. Up from its center leapt a lovely, sleek, tapered creature, which seemed to sniff the air, and then began to swim in knifing circles around the pool. It was a female sea lion, just a bit bigger than Grunt.

We got up and started taking our clothes off. I encountered a confused but considerable resistance from Grunt's limbs at this juncture—had particular trouble getting us out of our pants.

At last I got us undressed, and Grunt, standing naked by the pool's brink and watching the big silver mammal circling sleek as a shark, seemed

suddenly awestruck by his situation. He understood that he was about to join that magnificent beast circling in the silver flux and mate with her.

For a moment Grunt swayed on his feet and knew a moment of awestruck clarity. “My God!” he croaked. “This is … impossible! This is … amazing!”

The sea lion erupted from the water, a shining elliptical presence like that slender moon above us. A creature of stunning beauty. With a stroke of her lovely blade-shaped foreleg she knocked our legs out from under us, and we joined—after some foaming turmoil—in a sinuous twining of our bodies out in the deep cool center of the pond.

Grunt attempted some pretty powerful resistance at the outset, but before too long I was able to recruit his generative apparatus into the enterprise. The sea lion spun us gracefully in the star-filled pond, and we mated there.

Such power in this smooth form! Designed she seemed to cross a whole cosmos of water. I began to conceive the *extent* of Her realm, directly from this creature’s powerful design.

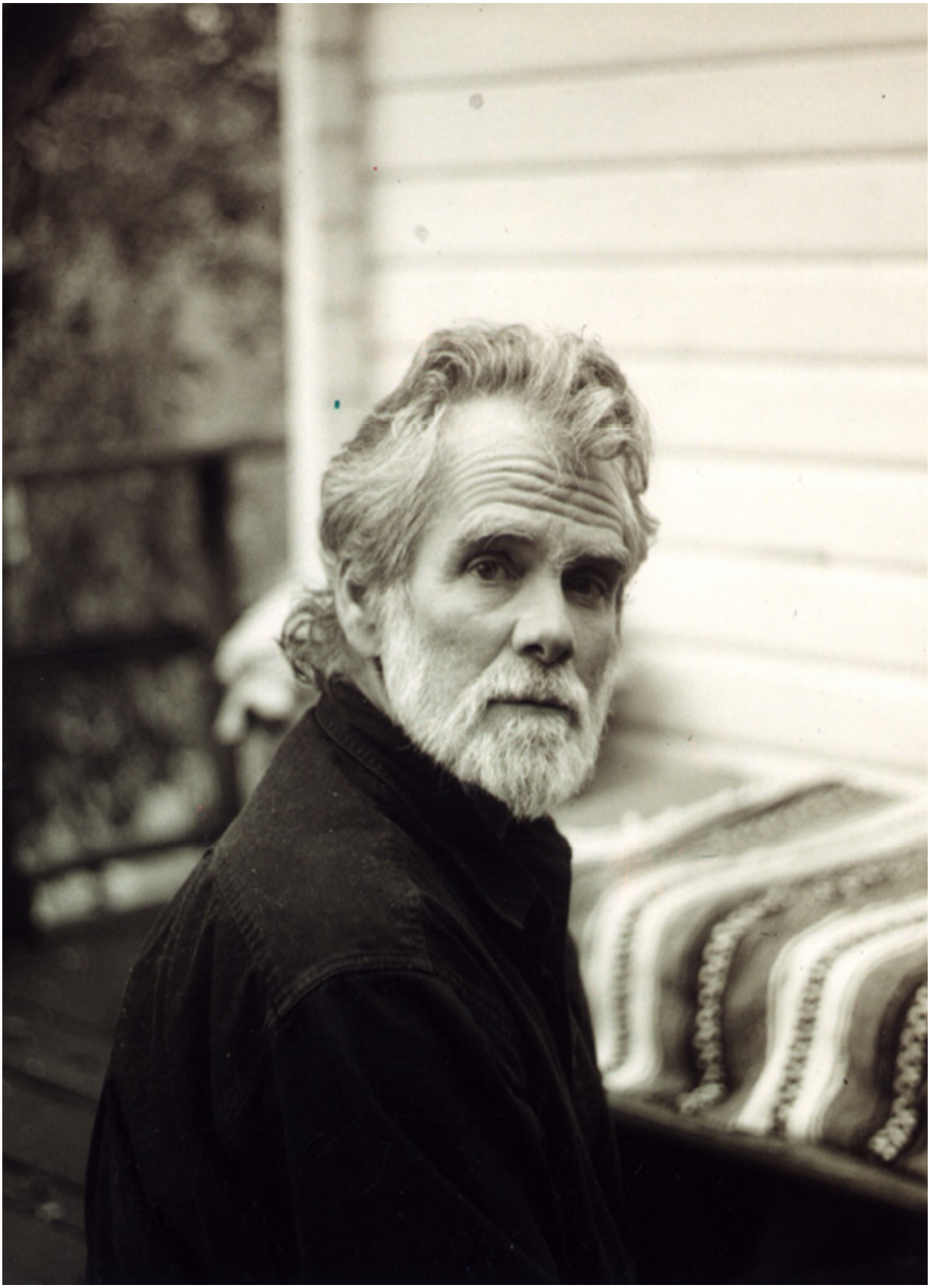
And not long after, though part of me still lay in snoring Grunt, my greater part soared out with her to the open ocean, and we swam the abyss of marvelous titans she frequented.

IN MEMORIAM

Michael Shea was born in Culver City in a house that stood across the street from the MGM Studios, which presented to his infant view a series of high brown walls, stretching nine blocks eastward down bustling Washington Boulevard. Large billboards were mounted on those walls presenting technicolored tableaux to the streaming traffic, and to Shea's young eyes (e.g., Clark Gable holding Vivien Leigh in his arms preparatory to carrying her up the stairs of a flaming southern mansion.) Such grandiose archetypes persisted in Shea's psyche.

"Serious" fiction was out of his reach—he was a junkie for the extraordinary, the hyperbolic. What other genres to receive his fledgling flights but supernatural fantasy and horror? And thus we had him, a confirmed hyperbolicker.

Michael Shea was a multiple World Fantasy Award winner and Hugo and British Fantasy Award nominee. His publications are listed on his website, michaelsheaauthor.com. He received a bachelor's degree from the University of Berkeley, California, in English Literature, as well as a master's degree in Creative Writing from the University of San Francisco. He was an English teacher in the Bay Area for 30 years. Michael passed away in 2014.



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